Meet Me In the Woods
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Character:	Luz Noceda, Amity Blight, Hunter | The Golden Guard (The Owl House), Willow Park, Gus Porter, Camila Noceda, Vee (The Owl House), Flapjack | Cardinal Palisman (The Owl House), Eda Clawthorne, Raine Whispers, Darius Deamonne, Eberwolf (The Owl House), Dell Clawthorne, Lilith Clawthorne, Alador Blight, Hooty (The Owl House), Hettie Cutburn | Healing Coven Head, Osran | Oracle Coven Head (The Owl House), The Collector (The Owl House), Philip Wittebane | Emperor Belos, King (The Owl House), Owlbert (The Owl House)
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Meet Me In the Woods

by bethanyisinjail

Summary

After the Day of Unity, everything fell apart. Luz and her friends got themselves stuck in the Human Realm, while the Owl House has become a refuge camp for the small handful of witches who have escaped the Collector's spell. When they finally get reunited, though, things aren't as great as they thought. The Collector and Belos are still running wild while they're all cooped up in the same, small space desperately trying to piece back together the

Boiling Isles.

And none of them even have a start on how to do it.

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Eda gets there in record time, soaring into the room and landing, immediately calling to her kid, who is bent over Hunter on the ground, “Luz!

She looks up, face lighting up as she runs over, “Eda!”

Eda wraps her arms around her, Luz holding her tight.

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Notes

hiiii!!!!!!! i am really upset that flapjack died so i decided no he didn't and now i have plans for a long, multi-chapter fic about fixing everything that happened in the boiling isles after s2. i'm a pretty irregular but frequentish poster but i have a lot of passion for this story so i should be updating pretty often!!!!

((title: 'meet me in the woods' by lord huron))

A Boy And His Bird

“Argh!” Luz grunts as she’s thrown backward by a Belos-infected Hunter, Amity quickly piecing together a bridge of vines and ice for her to land on. They don’t get any time to do anything, though, because the small chirps of Flapjack make all of them go silent. Willow can’t do anything but watch as the bird pecks at the horns that grew out of Hunter’s head, tweeting at him. Hunter twitches a bit, but just maniacally smiles, grabbing at Flapjack, who is furiously dodging him. He gets a hold of him though, Flapjack twittering in pain as Belos’ haunting, green hands grip him.

“That's right. You wouldn't want me harming your precious palisman, would you? Oh, but then again, I don't care what you want,” Belos says in his haunting, dual-toned voice. Flapjack squeaks louder as he’s gripped tighter, Hunter twitching again, face contorting into a pained expression. His big blue eyes flash back to purple as he stumbles.

“Hunter!” Luz yells, “Hunter! Let Flapjack go!”

Hunter’s twitching head looks over at Flapjack, eyes widening. His hand snaps open, Flapjack going to fly away. Just as fast as he does, though, his eyes glow blue again and his body grabs back at Flapjack, digging his claws into the bird’s wing. Flapjack squeals in pain, Hunter’s eyes flickering as his body jerks, tossing Flapjack over towards Luz. She jumps up onto her knees to catch him, cupping the bird in her hands. Amity rushes up behind her girlfriend, Camila, Vee, Gus, and Willow all right behind her. Willow sees Flapjack in Luz’s hands, his wing pierced but otherwise ok. She isn’t looking down for long, though, because Hunter starts painfully groaning and stumbling around. He holds his arm up and punches himself in the face, falling to the ground on his knees and panting, eyes flickering back to purple, staying like that this time. He stands back up, grabbing his arm as he stumbles towards the water, a voice that’s distinctly Hunter’s ringing out through the forest.

“You know what I’d like, Belos? I’d like to leave the Emperor’s Coven and never step foot in that throne room again. I’d like to study wild magic and learn how to carve palismen. I’d like to attend Hexside as a regular student and play Flyer Derby with my friends,” Hunter picks up the vial of Titan’s blood sitting by the water, holding it up like he’s going to throw it, “But most of all, I’d like to make sure you never hurt anyone again!”

Hunter throws the vial in the water, but the moment that it leaves his hand his eyes flash back blue, Belos screaming, “No!”

He dives into the water, Camila moving them out of the way as she dives into the water after him, resurfacing with Hunter in her arms a moment later. Willow is right there when she pushes him up onto the surface, laying his head in her lap. Camila climbs out of the water, kneeling in front of him. His eyes glow white, Camila moving out of the way as the green parts of Hunter fly out of him, the vial of Titan’s blood going with them. Belos forms in front of them in his tall, lanky, gooey form that they fought back in the Demon Realm. He turns around and walks up to the archway, smashing the Titan’s blood on the top as he speaks.

“This is for the good of your souls. You'll thank me later,” He says before a swirly portal forms in front of him, Belos stepping through without hesitating. The moment he’s gone Hunter shoots up and starts painfully coughing, Willow putting a hand on his back. Camila walks back up next to him, rubbing his shoulder and leaning down to look at him.

“Breathe, baby, keep coughing, you’re ok,” She assures him, Hunter just forcing out between coughs.

“Flapjack, Flapjack,” He coughs out, Willow leaning over his shoulder to see him holding his cupped hands out for the bird, Luz moving to sit in front of him and handing it over. He pulls Flapjack up to sit right against his chest, starting to take deeper but still shuddering breaths. In the moment of silence, though, Camila looks over at her daughter, exclaiming.

“ *That’s* the Belos you’ve been fighting this whole time?!” She questions, pointing at the portal, “That thing?”

“Yeah, yeah him,” Luz nods, looking back over her shoulder before looking back at Hunter, then up at Willow, Amity Gus, and Vee all behind him, “We need to go through, we need to get Hunter help.”

Amity goes to argue, “But what about-”

“Hunter needs help,” She cuts her off, “We need to go through the portal while it’s still open.”

Willow nods, looking back at Gus. The two of them lock eyes for a moment, both mutually agreeing that going back to the Boiling Isles right now is something they *need* to do, as hard as it’s going to be. Willow moves around to the other side of Hunter from where Camila is sitting, telling him, “Come on, we’re going to go through, Gus and I will help you.”

He just silently nods, looking down at Flapjack in his hands with tears in his eyes. He’s moved to holding him between his hands, rather than just cupping them, keeping the bird very close to his chest. He’s still clearly breathing shallowly, Willow looking back at Gus as he walks up, Camila standing up and stepping back to let him get on the other side. Willow stands, too, both of them grabbing an arm and helping him up, Hunter weakly stumbling his way toward the portal with the two of them supporting him. Willow and Gus share mutually worried looks, but neither stops before going through the portal. It’s almost seamless as they land right back where they left in the head of the Titan, Hunter stumbling forward out of their arms. They both rush down to his side, Willow moving to sit in front of him when she hears Flapjack twitter, seeing how tightly Hunter is gripping the bird.

“Hey, Hunter, you need to be easy on Flapjack,” She tells him, reaching out to try to pry his hands open, “He’s hurt, you can’t squeeze him like this, you’re gonna hurt him more.”

Hunter doesn’t let up, Willow pulling at his hands to get them open. Eventually he relents, letting them fall to his side as Willow takes Flapjack from him, panicking when Hunter’s breath catches in his throat and he starts to lean backward, Gus catching him before he leans back too much and slams his head into the steps to the portal door. Flapjack loudly tweets in pain, Gus and Willow looking at each other panicked before Willow quickly hands Flapjack back to Hunter, quieting the bird and letting Hunter sit back up on his own.

“What the…” Gus trails off, looking back as Amity steps through the portal, looking down at the three of them on the floor.

“What’s going on?” She asks, “Is he ok?”

“Yeah, uh, we have no idea,” Willow nervously answers.

“Willow took Flapjack from him and Hunter got all woozy and Flapjack started violently twittering, there’s something weird between the two of them,” Gus tells her, all of them looking back as Camila and Luz phase through the portal, which lingers for only a moment before the film of the swirling space fades away, just leaving the dilapidated archway of the door. Camila comes right over to where they’re sitting on the ground, attention focused on Hunter, who is staring down

at Flapjack wide-eyed and clearly out of it.

“Calm down, cariño, your bird is right there, you need to breathe,” She tells him, rubbing his shoulder. Hunter just wordlessly shakes his head, Camila looking back at the exit of the room, shaking her head before looking up at Luz.

“Mija, there’s no one out here,” She says, Luz sighing.

“They’ll- They’ll come, they have to come. They’re probably watching and-”

Luz is cut off when a blur of red, black, and gray comes flying into the room, Willow recognizing the voice before registering anything else.

“Luz!”

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Eda flicks up a snail into the air, catching it in her hand and flipping it over on the back of her other abomination hand. She looks up at Raine sitting across from her in the living room, showing them the side it landed on.

“Back,” She says, Raine looking at her confused.

“Both sides look the same, what do you mean that’s the back?” They question.

“It’s just the back, bet again,” She tells them Raine sighing before just shrugging and guessing.

“Front,” They reply, Eda putting the snail on her thumb to flick into the air, although the moment it leaves her hand Osran, who they’ve put in front of several crystal balls to watch everything they can, yells.

“The portal!”

Eda jumps up, letting the snail fall to the ground as she, Raine, Lilith, and Darius with Eberwolf on his shoulder rush behind the Oracle Coven head, Eda pushing herself to the front. She watches first as a strange green and hauntingly familiar amalgamation steps through, rushing off immediately. Everyone in the room holds their breath, waiting for a minute later when someone else finally breaches the barrier, Gus, Willow, and a clearly injured Hunter stepping through. She watches as Hunter falls down, Willow sitting in front of him and seemingly trying to take away Flapjack, who is clasped in his hands. The boy starts to fall back, Darius trying to start.

“He’s hurt, we need to-”

“Shh,” Eda holds a finger up to him, shushing him as she intently watches. Hunter gets back Flapjack and sits back up again, and next through is Amity. Not even a minute later she’s followed by Luz and a woman who looks like her mom, Eda holding up her arm and calling Owlbert’s staff into her hand, Raine putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Eda, we need to think about this-”

“I’m thinking about nothing! That’s my kid, I’m getting her back and I’m doing it *now* !” She booms back, not fighting it when the Owl Beast jockeys for joint control, letting herself morph into

her harpy form. She rushes out of the house before anyone can say anything, not looking back and flying as fast as she can to the Head. It takes her barely any time, either, fueled by pure *need* to make sure they're all alright, that Luz is alright. It's been two month's worth of worry, and as hard as it was it's speeding her up tenfold right now.

She gets there in record time, soaring into the room and landing, immediately calling to her kid, who is bent over Hunter on the ground, "Luz!"

She looks up, face lighting up as she runs over, "Eda!"

Eda wraps her arms around her, Luz holding her tight. Eda feels the familiar knot that's been sitting in her chest since the Day of Unity start to fade, knowing at least *one* of her two kids is safe and sound, right in front of her. For now, that's all she can ask for.

"Are you ok, kid? Nothing bruised or broken?" She asks, putting her hands on Luz's shoulders, having her step back so Eda can get a good look at her. Luz shakes her head.

"No, no, I'm fine, but we need help for Hunter. Belos he- he possessed him, and then he almost killed Flapjack and now they're both really hurt and Belos went through the portal and I-"

"Shh, hey, it's ok, we're going to figure it out, take a deep breath," Eda advises her, keeping a hand on her shoulder and walking over to where everyone is crowded around Hunter, Willow looking back and moving over to let her crouch in front of him. He's crying, gasping for air and clutching Flapjack to his chest. Eda reaches out but doesn't touch him, softly saying, "Hey, kid, we're gonna get you somewhere safe and patch you and your bird up, ok? You just need to let me help."

Hunter stares at her in fear but hesitantly nods, Eda smiling at him. She looks over when she hears the woman who came through with Luz whispering to her.

"Luz, is this one of your friends here?" She nervously asks, Luz nodding.

"Oh, I uh, should introduce you," Luz says, gesturing between the two, "Eda, this is my mom, Mamá, this is Eda."

"Nice to meet you Eda, I've heard quite a bit, you can call me Camila," She says, Eda hesitantly smiling back.

"Yeah, nice to meet you," She awkwardly replies, glancing over at Hunter.

"Lengthy introductions later, yeah, let's help him first," She agrees, Eda nods, standing up and holding out her staff to Luz, who reaches out for it very hesitantly.

"Take it, kid, take your mom and you back to the Owl House, I'll lead the way, ok?" She firmly requests, Luz pulling her hand back a bit.

"Eda, I-"

Every head looks back towards the doorway of the room when they hear a haunting, child's laugh from outside, Eda immediately identifying it as the Collector's.

"No, now. We need to go," She steps closer, "I know you can, it's been a while but Owlbert remembers you, trust him. He'll keep you both safe."

Luz looks at her for a moment before taking the staff, Eda silently sighing in relief. She bends down and scoops up Hunter, holding under his knees and his neck, immediately feeling him tense

up.

“It’s just me, we’re taking you to the Owl House, kid, relax,” She tries to coach him, although it does absolutely nothing in getting him to calm down. She ignores it, the feeling of the Collector nearby making her skin crawl. The last thing these kids need after whatever just happened to them is to be caught by *that* guy. She looks over at Gus, Amity, and Willow, who have both stood up and are staring at her nervously, although she’s pretty sure Willow has her eyes locked on the boy she’s holding. “Do you three have your palismen?” She questions, all of them summoning their staff into their hands. “Great, all of you follow me, I’ll lead you back. *Don’t* wander unless you want the star kid to take you into his dollhouse town. Got it?”

All of them nod, Eda taking a deep breath before nodding her head towards the door, everyone silently following as she takes off. She slows down this time, periodically glancing back to make sure that everyone is following. She feels bad about throwing Luz’s mom into the deep end flying back, but they really had no other choice. The boy in her arms is growing progressively more breathless and they need to get him to the healer *now* , there was no time to call someone for another way home.

About halfway back, after checking behind her to make sure everyone is keeping up, she looks down into her arms to see Hunter weakly coughing, practically gasping for air.

“Hang on, Hunter, we’re almost there,” She reassures him, “We’re gonna get you and your bird help.”

He doesn’t even look up at her, just staring at the bird cupped to his chest, wide-eyed. Flapjack has been twittering to him the entire time, things completely incomprehensible to Eda but whatever it is it’s keeping Hunter awake and relatively calm for everything going on, especially considering Eda knows Hunter has a tendency to panic.

“Keep listening to him, kid,” She tells him, looking back up at where she’s going. She repeats the routine of reassuring him they’re almost there as they fly, unsure if he’s actually listening or not. She also keeps tabs on how far behind the kids are, having to slow down a bit as they get closer, sure that they’re tiring out from whatever kind of day they had back in the Human Realm. She *really* doesn’t want to, for the sake of the breathless Hunter she’s holding, but she figures if he was in his right mind, he wouldn’t want to lose all his friends on the way back home either.

After what feels like an eternity, they land outside the Owl House, Eda walking up to the door.

“You’re back!” Hooty cheers, Eda just rolling her eyes and demanding.

“Let me in, Hooty,” She annoyedly answers, Hooty stretching out from his spot in the door to look down at Hunter in her arms. “Are you fact checking that he’s dying?! Hooty, just let us in!”

“Alright, alright, geez,” He goes back into his spot into the door, opening his mouth wide enough to let Eda through in her harpy form. The room is notably without a few people, leaving only Raine, Darius, and Lilith in the room, probably for the sake of not crowding everyone coming in. The moment she steps through Raine rushes over from where they were on the couch, Eda looking over at them.

“He needs a healer, the bird, too, something to do with Belos,” She tells Raine, who looks at her shocked.

“Belos?!” Raine exclaims, Eda shaking her head.

“Later, please,” She begs, “He needs someone *now* .”

“Ok, ok, I’ll get Hettie,” Raine nods, Eda calling after them.

“And my dad too,” She yells, Raine holding up a thumbs up as they hurry back to the door to the tower where all the Coven Heads, and the couple of other fugitives they rescued from the Collector, are living. Because she’s not confident in his ability to *not* fall off the couch, Eda sets down Hunter on the floor, immediately being rushed by everyone in the room wanting to get a look at him. She motions for them to get back a bit, “You’re gonna trample him, step back, give the kid some space.”

“What happened?” Darius asks, pointing down at Hunter, “The last time I saw him he didn’t have nearly this many scars.”

“Well I didn’t do it,” She clips back, “He came to me like that.”

“Belos possessed him,” Luz chimes in from where she’s standing back next to the coffee table Eda put Hunter in front of.

“Those scars are where his green goop was, if that’s any help,” Willow chimes in, stepping forward from where she backed up towards the door, “And when we got through the portal I tried to take Flapjack away from him and I think it made him weaker, I don’t know what happened.”

Eda and Darius share a very confused look with one another, Eda going to turn back to look at Willow but accidentally smacking Darius with a wing.

“Eda! Can you get rid of all these feathers? They’re getting all over me,” He complains, dusting off his cloak. Eda rolls her eyes but mentally pushes back at the Owl Beast, who just lets her take back control of the body and morph back to her normal form. Now normal-sized Eda, she fully turns back and nods, “Ok, sorry, we’ll have to get the whole story later, but, just, for now just everyone have a seat on the couch and give him some space, Raine should be back in a minute.”

Willow nods and steps back, walking over to Gus as the two nervously murmur to each other and walk over to the side on the loveseat to the left. Luz and her mom sit on the middle couch, Amity settling in on the outside of Luz and holding her hand. Eda looks back when she hears talking from the door, seeing Lilith gossiping with Hooty, who has stuck his head through the living room window. As obnoxious as that is she doesn’t bother fighting that fight right now, as her attention is drawn away by Luz.

“Eda, what happened to your hand?! Did you have that in harpy form?” She questions, Eda looking down at her newly constructed abomination hand.

“Oh, uh, yeah I did. It’s a long story, don’t worry about me,” She brushes her off, looking over when Raine comes back into the room a couple of seconds later, surprisingly followed first by Alador, Amity jumping up and running over to him.

“Dad!” She exclaims, throwing her arms around her father, “You’re alive!”

Eda hears her start to cry, ignoring it in favor of watching Hettie, thankfully without her stupid hood, and Eda’s dad follow in after them, going around the father-daugther reunion. Hettie walks up to Hunter first, crouching down in front of him and not saying anything, just going to draw a circle with her finger. She barely gets halfway through before Hunter protests, though.

“No! No stop!” He yells at her, although his words are just coming out in short, fast breaths, “Not me, forget about me, help Flapjack! His wing, it’s hurt, help him, please.”

“Boy, you’re a witch and he’s a bird, you’re-”

“No, no! Get away from me,” He weakly kicks at Hettie, who immediately steps back and holds her hands up.

“Fine, if you want it like that,” She concedes, walking off a bit. Eda’s dad steps around her to kneel in front of Hunter, Eda walking up to stand right behind him and watching. Darius does the opposite, moving back to sit in the last free armchair, Eda glancing back to see him intently watching what’s happening.

“Hey, Hunter, right?” He kindly asks, Hunter nodding, “I’m Dell, I’m going to help fix up your bird here. I carved palismen for a long time, I promise I’ll be nice and gentle with him, ok?”

Hunter scrambles backward, hitting his back on the coffee table behind him, although he doesn’t even flinch at it. Instead, he holds Flapjack closer to his chest, but Eda’s dad just keeps sitting there smiling at him.

“You don’t have to let him go just yet, I just want to see him. I promise I won’t touch until you tell me it’s ok,” Eda’s dad assures him, “Can you just hold him out?”

Hunter stares at him for a minute, tearful eyes wide, but eventually he holds out the bird, opening his hands so Flapjack can turn and face her dad. The bird tweets at him.

“Hello little guy,” He warmly greets Flapjack, chuckling and pointing to his eye that’s scarred closed, “I have an eye just like yours, you’re very cute,” He looks up at Hunter, “What’s your palisman’s name?”

“Fl-Flapjack,” Hunter breathlessly tells him, Eda’s dad nodding.

“Flapjack, alright, Flapjack, I’m going to help that wing of yours, ok?” He calmly says, holding out his shaking hands, “I need to see you, though.”

Hunter immediately snatches Flapjack back, who angrily twitters.

“Woah, Hunter, be gentle with him, the cuts on his wing are bad, you need to be gentle so you don’t tear it anymore. I’m just going to take him and put him on the coffee table, you can watch,” He tells the cowering boy in front of him, “Please, I promise to help.”

Hunter stares at him for a minute before handing over Flapjack, Eda watching her dad sigh in relief. Hunter slumps back against the table when he does, but he stays conscious, eyes transfixed on his bird.

“Thank you, Hunter, I’m going to work on him right here,” He assures Hunter as he moves over to sit in front of the coffee table, placing Flapjack on top of it. Eda watches as he shakily begins to examine Flapjack. He talks to Hunter as he does, Eda so thankful her dad understands the importance of keeping Hunter as calm as he can be right now. “Mhm, I see, it’s just his wing that’s hurt, very manageable. This can be fixed, there’s no need to worry about him. This little bird of yours is made very well.”

“I-I didn’t make him,” Hunter answers, Eda’s dad nodding.

“When did he come to you?” He asks as he lightly lifts up Flapjack’s hurt wing.

“Uh, uh, a few months ago?” Hunter answers, face beginning to visibly relax. His breaths are still short, but they’re slowing down, a *vast* improvement from the panicking mess he was a couple of

minutes ago.

“He’s very connected with you, I can feel it. I’ve never heard a palisman talk so much,” He comments, “You understand all of it?”

“Mhm,” Hunter hums in affirmation, Eda’s dad stopping what he’s doing. Hunter stiffens, her dad just looking back at Eda.

“Witchlet, I know how to fix this but I can’t do it myself,” He says, “I need your help, I need you to carve for me.”

Eda steps back, holding up her hand in front of her, “No, no no no, I can’t do that.”

“Eda-”

“Dad, I really can’t help,” She denies, “I- You know the curse messes with my magic and I haven’t carved anything other than Luz’s egg in a really long time and I don’t think I can-”

“Edalyn, I would never ask you for something I didn’t think you could do,” He tries to reassure her, but Eda wants *none* of it.

“Dad, I can’t,” She shakes her head, both of them looking over in surprise when Hunter butts in.

“Can’t you just help him? He’s gonna die, you need to help him!” He cries, Eda awkwardly rubs the back of her neck.

“Kid, I know you’re worried about him but I don’t think you want me doing this I-”

“You’re the only one here that can help him!” He yells, “I don’t care why, you need to help him!”

“I-”

“Stop saying no! Stop being a coward just help Flapjack p-p-pl,” He starts wheezing, Willow jumping off the couch to come sit next to him and rub his arm, looking up at Eda pleadingly.

“Please, just help him,” She begs, Eda just standing there stunned.

“Help him! Stop standing there!” Hunter forces out another pained scream, beginning to violently cough. Willow whispers to him, rubbing his back and trying to calm him down. Hunter shakes his head, looking up at Eda for an answer. She’s frozen, though, so overwhelmed that every eye in the room is trained on her. She looks around nervously, eyes bouncing back to Luz when she chimes in too.

“Eda, just do it, just say yes. Trust your dad and help so Hunter stops hurtung himself!” She frantically butts in, Eda beginning to feel the scratchiness of feathers popping up out of her arms as the Owl Beast beats at her skull, demanding her to let it back out. She ignores it, though, stammering as she tries to desperately make up her mind.

“Uh, I, I’ll, I can-”

“Help him!” Hunter yells, although this time it knocks all the wind out of him. He starts choking, failing at gasping for air, Eda completely unsure as to whether he’s having a panic attack or he’s dying, but either way she rushes over to crouch in front of him and help.

“Kid, kid stop, you need to take a deep breath,” She tries to advise him, Hunter just desperately pointing over to where Flapjack is. As Eda tries to think of what to do next, she hears soft violin

begin to fill the room, watching as Hunter's face starts to relax, hand dropping to his side. He glances at where the noise is coming from, Eda already knowing without even looking that Raine is the one playing. When Hunter looks over, Eda moves up next to him to put a hand behind his head, rubbing his shoulder and looking up at Hettie. She shoots her a look that Hunter needs to be put under a sleeping spell and *now* , Hettie just staring at her confused. She rolls her eyes but mouths to her, "Sleep."

Hettie nods, stepping up to kneel next to him and put him under a sleeping spell, Hunter slumping back to lay against Eda's hand holding him from falling against the coffee table. Willow helps as Eda moves him to lay on the ground, Hettie shooing Willow off once Hunter is laying down. She begins to scan him, looking up at Darius sitting on the armchair.

"Darius, make yourself useful and grab some clothes for the boy, he's soaking wet," She demands, Darius getting up but not leaving.

"Where do you expect me to find clothes for him?" He clips back.

"I don't care, search through whatever you need, he needs something to wear," She argues, Darius just rolling his eyes before walking off. The music slowly stops and Eda just turns around to look at what her dad is doing. She doesn't say anything at first, just watching as he shakily holds Flapjack in his hands, who is chirping over at Hunter.

"I'll help you," She tells her dad, "I'll help."

He looks over and smiles at her, "Thank you, witchlet, thank you. We need to carve him a new wing, but before that we need to brew some adhesive, you can do that, right?"

"Yeah, yeah I can, I don't have the ingredients for that on hand," She replies.

"I- I don't know how we're getting this wing off, I'm afraid for both his sake and Hunter's that turning Flapjack to wood will be bad. This connection between them, I think they're keeping each other alive. Locking Flapjack up wouldn't do either of them any good, both with him leaking magic and Hunter feeding off of it," He tells her, "But we can't cross that bridge until we figure out what's wrong with Hunter."

Eda goes to answer, but both of them are interrupted when Hettie calls to the room.

"I can't heal this boy, I have no idea what he is," She bluntly tells everyone, Eda looking back at her confused.

"Are you blind? Look at him, he's a witch," Eda points at his ears, Hettie shooting her an annoyed look.

"If he was a *witch* , I would be able to tell," She quips back, "His anatomy is nothing like any witch or demon that I've *ever* seen. His lungs are filled with water but they're eroding like they're made of stone, I don't know how to fix erosion."

"So take the water out," Eda tells her.

"If I could do that without hurting him, Owl Lady, I would," Hettie answers, "I need to know what this thing is."

"He's a person," Willow argues from the couch, "And, I mean, once he told me he was a powerless witch, but that's all he's ever said to me."

“A powerless witch is still a witch,” Hettie reasons, “He is *not* one.”

Eda sighs, “Ok, alright, do any of you know *anything* about Hunter that we don’t?”

She looks around at all the kids, all worriedly glancing at one another except for one of them: Luz. The guilt is written all over her face, an extremely familiar expression Eda can’t believe she’s missed while she’s been gone. Although, in this instance, it’s a little more serious than sneaking out with Owlbert to see Amity way after she should be in bed. Hunter is going to *die* if she doesn’t spill whatever she’s thinking.

“Luz, I know you know something, spit it out, kid,” Eda encourages her, “It’s written all over your face.”

“Oh, I, I uh, don’t know anything about Hunter! He’s just a normal uh, guy,” She nervously answers, glancing around at everyone. Her mom rubs her shoulder, smiling at her.

“If you know something you need to tell us so we can help Hunter, mija, no one is going to be mad,” She assures her, Luz looking around again before taking a deep breath and squeezing her eyes closed, blurting out.

“Hunter is a Grimwalker!” She tells everyone, the whole room stilling. Eda looks back down at the boy next to her, then up at a completely lost Hettie.

“I don’t know how to treat Grimwalkers, there’s nothing I can do to help him,” She tells Eda, who glances up at the group of terrified kids looking down at them. She processes the potential thought that they can’t help him, taking a deep breath.

“Does anyone know *anything* about Grimwalkers?” She questions, looking over when Darius comes back into the room, holding what looks like Raine’s clothes for Hunter.

“None of you are teenage boy sized so I figured Raine was the closest,” He tells everyone, looking up and stopping when everyone is staring at him. “I know I’m stunning but there’s no need to bore holes into me.”

“Do you know anything about Grimwalkers?” Eda asks, Darius sighing but nodding.

“I see, I was hoping you wouldn’t need to know to fix him, but I guess that’s ridiculous,” He nods as he walks up closer, setting the clothes on the coffee table and crouching in front of Hunter to look at him, “I don’t know a lot, the Emperor gutted the libraries for any information on them, for, well, obvious reasons. I know the three main ingredients, that’s it.”

“For a healing potion, that’ll work,” Eda tells him, “What are they?”

“Stonesleeper lungs, Galdorstone, and palistrom wood,” He answers, “I’ve got no idea how much or what else is involved, you’ve got all I know.”

“That’s good, that’s all we need,” She sighs, “But also bad, that’s what we need.”

“You’re telling me we need to *get* those things to help him?” Darius questions, “Stonesleepers are *literally* extinct.”

“And palistrom wood is impossible to find,” Willow chimes in, clearly on the verge of tears, “Is he gonna be ok?”

“Yes, yes, he’s gonna be just fine, we can get all this stuff,” She assures them, getting up and going

over to where her sister and Hooty are *still* chattering away, grabbing Lilith and dragging her over to the group. “Lily here I *know* has a machine that finds time pools, so she can get us Stonesleeper lungs.”

“Huh?” Lilith questions, looking at Eda in confusion, “Why do we need those?”

“Kid is a Grimwalker, keep up Lily,” She pokes back, looking at Darius, “Where is Eberwolf? We’re sending him with her.”

“In his room, I’ll get him,” Darius nods, going off down the hallway to the tower. Eda pats Lilith on the shoulder, whispering to her.

“Go get your time pool machine before one of these kids starts crying, the glove with the Titan’s blood is under the floorboard in my room, the one King kindly doodled all over to make it as obvious as possible. It’s still there, I know it is.”

“Ooo! Another time pool mission, how exciting,” Lilith muses as she walks off to go upstairs.

“Ok, Galdorstones, who wants that mission?” She asks, looking around at the remaining handful of kids in the room.

“I know where they are, the Looking Glass Graveyard! I’m friends with the caretaker” Gus tells her, “I can get them, I know where to go.”

“I’ll go with Gus,” Willow chimes in, standing up and pulling him to his feet, “We’ll go, we can get them.”

“I’m not sending two kids by themselves to some strange graveyard,” She denies, looking over at Raine, the only remaining adult in the room *not* doing anything.

“I’ll go, yeah, you don’t even have to ask,” They agree, looking over to the two kids, “Come on, let’s go, I’m going with you.”

Gus and Willow rush over to Raine, Eda holding out a hand to them, “Hold on, don’t leave yet. We still need someone to get the palistrom wood.”

“I’ll go, Eda, I can do it,” Luz stands up, Amity jumping in to volunteer with her from where she’s standing by her dad near the wall.

“Yeah, and me too, we can get it,” She nods. As much as she wants to say no, make Luz stay in her sights, she knows she can do this.

“Alright, fine, Luz come here,” Eda holds up her hand and calls Owlbert into it, handing him over to Luz when she steps up in front of her, “Keep him with you, I know it’s been a while but you know your way around here, kid, I trust you.”

“Uh, thanks- thank you Eda,” She nods, smiling at her, “I’ll be safe.”

“Good, kid,” Eda ruffles her hair, looking up as Luz’s mother makes her way over to her. Luz gives her a big hug, repeating assurances that she’ll be ok and she’s done way worse than this before. It causes Eda to take a step back, a really unfamiliar feeling of jealousy settling in her chest. Normally before a big outing Luz gives *her* a hug and tells *her* that she knows what she’s doing. But her mom is here, so it *must* make sense that she wouldn’t do that with Eda anymore. Why would she?

She doesn't get to wallow long, though, because Darius and Eberwolf come back into the room a minute later, Eda pointing at Darius.

"You're on the palistrom wood mission, congrats," She flatly tells him, Darius huffing.

"To think I just washed my cloak this morning," He rolls his eyes, "And where do you recommend we find this almost completely extinct wood?"

Eda's dad looks back at them, "The Bat Queen has a hidden forest of trees, find her and tell her I sent you. Eda, do you still have the seed I gave you?"

Eda reaches into her hair, rustling around until she feels the small, palistrom seed, pulling it out and holding it out to Luz next to her. Her dad looks over at Luz.

"Give the Bat Queen the seed, tell her I sent you. You've met her before, haven't you?" He asks, Luz nodding. "Mhm, so you know she's a very proud character. You *can't* disrespect her or she'll never show you where the wood is. While you're there, too, you need to get the sap, leaves, roots, and dirt from the tree. It'll make some adhesive for Flapjack's new wing."

"Wood, sap, roots, leaves, dirt, got it," Luz nods, Eda wordlessly going out into the hallway into the small closet right outside the archway to the door, grabbing out three backpacks. She comes back into the room and hands one to Eberwolf, one to Raine, and one to Luz. They each thank her, Eda looking over when Lilith comes back down the stairs.

"I'm ready for my adventure!" She excitedly exclaims, Eda pinching the bridge of her nose at how *unaware* her sister is. She doesn't try to make her understand, though, just pointing at Eberwolf.

"Eber is going with you, at least one of you needs to have some sense of urgency," She comments, taking a deep breath before advising all of them, "The Collector is *everywhere* today, we heard them up at the Head earlier and who knows where they went from there. Keep quiet and keep your ears open, please. The last thing we need is someone else hurt."

"We got it, Eda, don't worry," Luz assures her, "We'll all be back in one piece."

"You better be," She playfully threatens, looking around at everyone, "Come back as soon as you can, be safe, don't do anything stupid."

Willow steps forward from where she and Gus are standing on either side of Raine, "What about when we're gone? Will Hunter be ok?"

"I'm keeping him stable," Hettie chimes in, "He'll be perfectly fine until you come back."

Willow nods, looking back at Raine, who just calmingly smiles.

"Let's not test that, though, go, be quick," Eda urges all of them, everyone bustling to leave. Raine comes up to her before they leave, the two sharing a hug. Eda looks at them, smiling, "Be safe, please, Rainestorm, don't push yourself. You got strong kids with you."

"Don't worry about me, I'll be ok," They assure her, giving her another hug, "I'll be back soon."

"You better," She jokingly threatens, playfully pushing their shoulder as they walk away. Hooty excitedly says bye to every person going out the door, only Lilith bothering to reply to him. Once the door shuts behind her, being the last one out, the room plunges into a deafening silence. All they can hear is Flapjack's twittering and Hunter's extremely shallow breathing. Luz's mom is the first to say anything.

“Are they going to be ok?” She asks Eda, who looks over and nervously nods.

“Yeah, yeah, they’ve all done way worse than this,” Eda nods, the woman just smiling at her.

“I trust you, Eda,” She assures her, “You have kept Luz safe for a long time, I trust you would not get her hurt now.”

“Yeah, I’ve tried my best,” Eda nods again, awkwardly taking a couple of steps back, “I need to start brewing, in the other room. Uh, I’ll be in there if you need anything.”

“Alright,” She smiles at her, “Thank you.”

“Mhm,” Eda hums, walking off into the hallway and to their kitchen, thankfully hearing Alador and Luz’s mom start to talk in the other room, putting her at ease that she’ll get to be alone. She pulls out two cauldrons and sets them on the counter. She takes out her brewing book, beginning in one of the cauldrons a general healing potion, in which she’ll add the three parts of a Grimwalker once they’re here. She looks over when Hooty sticks his head through the window behind her, Eda groaning.

“What do you want?” She annoyedly questions, *really* wanting to just brew without anyone bothering her.

“Hettie wants to know if you need the potions guy,” He asks, Eda rolling her eyes.

“I’m powerless, not stupid, Hooty, I don’t need that pile of toxic waste anywhere *near* my brewing,” She clips back at him and turns away, Hooty stretching in further to look at her.

“I told her that! She didn’t listen!” He tells her, “I told her you’re the best brewer on the Boiling Isles and she told me to ask anyway, I’m on your side! Don’t get mad at me!”

She sighs but looks over at Hooty and gives him a small smile, “Thanks, Hooty, I appreciate it. No, I don’t need Vitimir, and tell her if she doesn’t put everything she has into keeping Hunter alive I’m going to toss her back into the Collector’s big dollhouse game.”

“Will do!” Hooty brightly replies, zipping back out of the room. The window shuts behind him, Eda going back to her potion. Thankfully, no one else comes back, letting her brew in relative silence. She knows her dad, Luz’s mom, and Alador are all in there to make sure that Hettie isn’t trying to kill him. Not that she would, either, Eda *knows* those Coven Heads owe her *big time* for not leaving them to get mind controlled. So, she just leaves that burden to them, putting her focus on making a *really* strong healing base for this potion. It’s relatively calming, although the thought of needing to carve Flapjack a new wing just haunts the back of her mind. Whatever, problem for later, she’ll cross that bridge when she gets there.

First, she just needs to hope all their missions go well.

Pick up the Pace!

Chapter Notes

> tbh already have chapter 3 written went a little crazy but im so into this book it isn't even funny

Luz swings the hand holding Amity's back and forth, looking back when she hears a dramatic sigh from behind her.

"Do *either* of you know where you're going?" Darius questions, "Or are we going to be wandering pointlessly through the forest at dusk forever?"

"I *know* where I'm going, Darius," Luz annoyedly replies, "Just keep following me."

"I can't believe I'm letting two 15-year-olds lead me around," He murmurs to himself, Luz and Amity looking at each other and smiling, rolling their eyes at the pompous coven head babbling to himself behind them. They finish off the last of their walk in silence, arriving at the entrance to the Bat Queen's cave pretty quickly considering it's been a while since Luz has been here. She looks back at Darius, sticking her tongue out at him. He rolls his eyes, Luz rushing into the cave and pulling Amity behind her. She doesn't get far, though, before the Bat Queen's voice booms through the cave.

"Who dare step into my cave?" She yells, "No one is invited here, leave."

"Bat Queen! It's Luz, we need your help!" Luz calls back, "Please just- just hear us out."

A beat of silence goes by before they hear rustling further in the cave, and a moment later Bat Queen walks up to them, Luz looking over to see her girlfriend marveling up at the huge bat in front of her. Darius comes up beside her as well, looking at her annoyedly, although he doesn't get to say anything. The Bat Queen scowls at them, motioning her claw up and wrapping both Amity and Darius in the cloth strewn around her cave.

"Hey! Those are my friends," Luz argues, Owlbert coming out of the staff and landing on Luz's shoulders. "Let them out!"

"No, no friends, I will only allow Luz the human to speak to me now. If it is so urgent, you will come with me. Friends will be safe here," She states, eyes lighting up yellow, and saying to Owlbert, "Good to see that you are safe, Owlbert. And Luz the human has good intentions, good." Her eyes turn back to normal again, "Luz, come with me into the cave, safer there we can talk."

Luz looks over nervously at Amity and Darius, Amity flashing her a reassuring smile. "Go, we'll be alright here," Amity assures her, Luz nodding before walking up closer to the Bat Queen, following as she flies back over to her stump, settling on top of it.

"What brings you to my forest in such dangerous times, Luz the human?" She asks, "Some time it has been since we have seen you. Eda the Owl Lady looked for you, have you found her again?"

"Oh, uh, yeah, yeah, I found Eda again. She was looking for me?" Luz asks, shaking her head when she remembers she's here for a reason, "Wait, conversation for later. Right now we need to

get parts from a palistrom wood tree."

"I am sorry, but after my palismen were attacked today I cannot bring you wood," She denies, going to turn away.

"No, wait, please. Mr. Clawthorne sent me, he needs this stuff to help a palisman," She pleads with her, Bat Queen freezing.

"A palisman?" She asks, hauntingly calm. She looks back and stares daggers at Luz, "And this palisman, who hurt them?"

"Belos, Belos hurt him," She tells her, Bat Queen perking up.

"Who is this palisman?" She questions, "Do I know them?"

"Flapjack," Luz answers, Bat Queen's eyes widening. Before she can make any more accusations, Luz adds, "His wing got hurt protecting Hunter, the boy he's bonded to, and Mr. Clawthorne needs a whole bunch of stuff to help fix him."

"And how do I know you are telling the truth, Luz the human?"

Luz reaches into her pocket and pulls out the seed Eda gave her, holding it out to the Bat Queen. She flies down onto the ground in front of Luz, using her talon to turn over the seed in her hand. The Bat Queen hums, nodding at her.

"What does he need?" She asks, Luz sighing in relief.

"Wood, sap, roots, leaves, and dirt," She counts the elements on her hand to make sure she has all five, "We need wood to help Hunter too. For uh, reasons."

"Hm, you are very vague, but Dell I trust. Stay, Luz the human, I will fetch you what you need," She tells her, whistling before telling Luz, "Babies will keep you company, they have missed you."

Bat Queen's three babies come flying out from behind her, all rushing over to land on Luz. She holds the smallest one in her arms, looking up as Bat Queen flies off into the woods. One of the babies begins to suck on her shoulder, gleefully squeaking at her. Owlbert hoots angrily at her, settling on the ground and staring up at Luz indignantly. She just laughs, looking around at the babies surrounding her.

"Hey guys, I missed you too," She coos at them, looking down at the baby asleep in her arms. She spends a couple of minutes entertaining the babies, just playing with the two bats flying around and bouncing the smallest one to keep it sleeping. She looks back, though, when someone calls her name down the cave.

"Luz!" Amity yells, "Is everything ok?"

"Yeah," She calls back, "Bat Queen is getting the stuff for us."

"Oh, really? Great, that's awesome," Amity answers, Luz looking back forward when Bat Queen comes flying back in, a bag clasped in her feet. She drops it in front of Luz, landing back on her stump.

"I have gotten what you need, Luz the human, but I can only let you go if you make me a promise," She says, Luz nodding.

“Of course, yeah, whatever you need,” Luz agrees, stepping forward towards the bag.

“Tomorrow I will come visit. I want to see how Flapjack is doing,” She states, “Give Dell my best wishes.”

“I will, thank you so much, Bat Queen,” Luz smiles at her, “I promise we’ll patch Flapjack up right.”

“It is Dell, I know he will not hurt any palisman,” She holds out her wings, the babies flying back over to land on their mom’s head, burying into her hair. Luz steps up and picks up the bag the Bat Queen brought, looking inside to make sure everything is in there. Bat Queen just chuckles, though. “I would not lie, Luz the human, do not worry. Everything you asked for is in there for you, plenty of it.”

“I trust you, I was just checking. Thank you again, I’ll see you tomorrow,” Luz waves at her, slinging the bag over her shoulder. Owlbert takes up flying next to her instead.

“Have safe travel, Luz the human, Owlbert. And take your friends with you,” She tells her, motioning a hand towards where Amity and Darius are tied up hearing the two loudly sigh in relief, Darius likely saying something along the lines of ‘Now my cloak is all dirty’. Luz smiles at the Bat Queen, waving again before rushing off down the cave, meeting up with Amity and Darius.

“Ugh, she better have given us everything we needed,” Darius complains as he tries to dust himself off, “I should’ve made Raine go with you two, maybe then I wouldn’t be covered in *dirt* .”

“You are not covered in any dirt,” Luz rolls her eyes, “Come on, we need to get back, get this stuff to Eda.”

“Alright, alright, let’s go,” Darius agrees, Luz rushing out of the cave. Amity chases after her, Darius just yelling, “Hey, I’m not running.”

“You better start!” Luz calls back behind her, continuing to run back to the Owl House. She hears Darius groan but she doesn’t look back, Amity running up next to her and laughing.

“I’ll race you,” She challenges, Luz smiling at her.

“Hey, that’s not fair, I have a huge bag,” Luz argues, Amity shrugging.

“And I don’t know my way back, so we’re both at a disadvantage,” She pokes back before running ahead of Luz, who speeds up to catch back up to her. The two jockey back and forth all the way home, neither of them looking back at all to check whether Darius is keeping up or not.

Amity wins the race back to the Owl House, hitting the door and playfully calling, “Beat you!”

“Like I said, completely unfair,” Luz playfully replies, out of breath. Amity just laughs and opens up the door, just walking by when Hooty starts yelling at them about ignoring him. They walk into the room to see Luz’s mom and Amity’s dad on the couch, Hettie on the floor hovering over Hunter, and Mr. Clawthorne sitting in front of the coffee table Flapjack is on, quietly talking to him. Everyone looks over when they walk into the room, Luz’s mom immediately getting up and rushing over to them.

“Are you alright? Why are you both out of breath?” She questions, Amity and Luz sharing cheeky smiles with each other before they laugh, Luz looking back at her mom and smiling.

“Don’t worry, we were just racing,” She assures her, “Not running from anything or anything. Well, we were running from Darius, I don’t know where he went, but it’s ok, he’ll get back hopefully. We got what we needed, though, where’s Eda?”

“She’s in the kitchen,” She tells her, “Making uh, something. She’s been in there for a while.”

“She’s probably brewing, she tends to get in the zone sometimes,” Luz says as she starts towards the kitchen, “Has anyone else come back yet?”

“No, not yet,” Her mom shakes her head, “You’re the first.”

Luz sighs, shoulders slumping in a bit of defeat, “Ok, well, hopefully Eda can do something with this.”

Luz leaves the room and heads down the hall, going into the kitchen to see Eda lazily leaning on the counter, stirring something in one of the two cauldrons on the counter. She looks up when Luz walks in, standing up straighter and smiling at her.

“Hey kid, welcome back,” She walks around the kitchen island and up to Luz, Owlbert flying back up to sit on her shoulder, nuzzling her face. “Got everything alright?”

“Yeah, all I had to tell the Bat Queen was that it was Flapjack hurt and she got everything,” Luz tells her, Eda rubbing her shoulder.

“Great job, I told you that you knew your way around,” Eda reassures her, Luz smiling up at the really warm feeling that fills her chest. She missed Eda a *ton* , and it feels nice to come back from a mission and get to hear her praise again. She hands over the bag to Eda, who takes it behind the kitchen counter, starting to mix stuff in the empty cauldron. Luz stands on her tiptoes to see into it.

“What are you making?” She asks, Eda looking up from the book she has set on the counter.

“Adhesive for Flapjack’s new wing,” She replies, “It won’t be ready for a bit, though, why don’t you go sit in the living room with your mom? Keep an eye on Cutburn for me.”

Luz furrows her brow at Eda, stepping back from the counter. It stings a bit, hearing Eda tell her to go away. It seemed innocent enough, she’s right, the potion will take awhile. But for some reason it hit her wrong, like her even being in the room will mess it up, Luz just nodding and stepping back towards the door.

“Oh, ok, yeah, I’ll go then,” Luz walks out of the room, secretly hoping Eda will call her back. She doesn’t, though, Luz going back into the living room to where her mom is sitting on the couch, Amity and her dad standing off by the wall next to the fireplace, talking about something. Luz goes over and sits next to her mom, who wraps an arm around her shoulders.

“What’s up, mija? Why do you look so sad?” She asks, “Are you ok?”

“Yeah, yeah I’m fine,” Luz nods, “Just- Weird being back, you know?”

“Mhm, I understand, but it’ll all work out. At least I think, I don’t know much about it here,” She chuckles, making Luz laugh too.

“Well, a lot of what I remember is not really the same now,” She leans against her mom, “But yeah, hopefully things will work out.”

Her mom leans over and gives her a kiss on the head, the two just sitting together in silence. Luz

fixates on Flapjack on the coffee table, his wings wrapped up in some kind of magical cloth, given that it's glowing the dark blue of healing magic. He's still chirping at Mr. Clawthorne, though, and although Luz can't hear what he's saying it sounds like he's in pain. Mr. Clawthorne rubs the top of his head, reassuring him that they're working on the stuff to fix him up with. She looks up, though, when the door opens, Darius walking in scowling.

Amity laughs, "Good to see you made it back."

"Remind me never to take orders from the Owl Lady again," He mumbles as he walks out of the room, Amity looking over at Luz. The two stifle laughs at how stuck up he is, although Amity's gaze doesn't linger long. She puts her focus back on talking to her dad, something Luz knows she's wanted to do for a while. It's been almost two months of hearing about how much Amity was hoping her dad was ok after she left him to fight his abominations on the Day of Unity, so she's sure this conversation is long overdue.

Luz can do nothing but just sit there, though, just waiting for everyone else to get back. A glance at Hunter on the floor, looking somehow paler than when they left, kicks up some anxiety in her chest. She *really* hopes that the other two groups get back here soon because the last thing they need is something happening to Hunter. As exhausted as she is, Luz wants nothing more than to run out that door and help out with whatever the two of them are doing, but she knows no one here is going to let her do that. She should have to, though it only makes sense.

Hunter is hurt because of her, anyway.

***

"Raine," Willow complains, looking back from where she and Gus are walking ahead of Raine. "It's getting dark."

"I know, Gus, do you know how far we are?" They ask, "We have to be close, right?"

"Uh, if I'm honest, I have no idea how far we are," Gus nervously replies, stopping and looking around, "I'm normally not paying attention to how much time it takes."

Raine sighs but nods, "Alright, well, hopefully we'll be there soon, before it gets too dark."

Willow nervously wraps her arms around her stomach, loudly sighing but continuing to walk, "Well let's keep going then, or we'll never get there."

Gus continues to walk with Willow, Raine continuing to trail behind the two of them. They quietly whisper to one another, Raine not bothering to tune in and listen to them. They seem to be keeping each other company without Raine, so they don't feel the need to intervene.

The walk continues like that for another few minutes, everything growing significantly darker. The path is very dimly lit by moonlight, and after walking in it for a bit Raine starts to feel like they're seeing things. Against their better judgment, they ask again.

"Gus, are you sure you don't know how far we are?" They question, Gus looking back, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Uh, not far?" He very hesitantly answers, "We're going the right way, uh, I think."

“You think?” Willow stops, turning to face Gus and nervously asking him, “Do you know where we’re going, Gus? Are we lost?”

“Uh, no, no, this way is the right way,” He attempts to confidently state, but it just makes Raine feel more like they’re lost. They keep walking though, following as Gus continues to lead them down the unmarked road.

They slow down when they watch Gus come to a stop, spinning around in a particularly dense circle of trees. Willow turns and looks at him again, Raine stepping right up behind the two of them.

“What’s going on?” Raine asks, “Everything alright?”

“Uh, I uh, I don’t know where we are,” Gus tells them, his voice wavering, “I don’t know if we’re going the right way.”

“What?” Willow questions, “Wait, are we lost?”

Gus looks between Willow and Raine, eyes wide, “Uh, maybe?”

“You don’t know? We can’t really be lost, right?” She asks, nervously laughing, “Right, Gus?”

“I, uh, I don’t- I,” Gus spins around in a circle, eyes wildly dancing to everything around them, although none of it is lit well enough to serve as any kind of landmark. He looks between Willow and Raine, eyes glinting with tears, “I don’t know.”

Willow’s arms wrap tighter around her stomach, the nervous look on her face twisting up more. Raine’s brain sputters with what to do, completely unsure how to console these two kids, *one* of which being their guide. As he looks around more, Gus’ eyes start to flicker blue, Raine just jumping the gun and just saying something. “Ok, uh, ok, do you recognize anything here? Anything at all?”

Gus shakes his head, tearfully replying, “No, no I don’t. I don’t know, I can’t see anything and-”

“Hey, it’s ok, take a deep breath,” Raine advises him, really unsure at how they’re supposed to help. “Think about where we are in a second, right now focus on just breathing, we’ll get there at some point.”

Gus wipes his eyes, turning away from Raine and looking over down the path further. He shakes his head but doesn’t look back. He starts to talk about it again, clearly crying this time, “I don’t know-”

“Think about that in a minute,” Raine stops him before he can spiral anymore. “Right now just breathe, Gus, even if we’re lost we can find our way there, take a deep breath.”

Gus takes a shaky deep breath in, Raine cautiously putting a hand on Gus’ shoulder. He doesn’t move away, Raine leaving their hand there as Gus takes a few deep breaths. They look over at Willow, although she’s just nervously glancing around. Raine needs to focus on getting them to the graveyard, though, which requires Gus to be calm first.

After about thirty seconds of Gus breathing, he looks to his right and points over at a collection of rocks. “I know that, we’re going the right way,” He weakly tells them, Raine rubbing his shoulder.

“Perfect, great, let’s keep going then. Take it slow, we’re following you,” Raine reassures him, trailing close as they keep a hand on Gus as he walks. He doesn’t pull his shoulder away, Raine

completely unsure if Gus wants their hand there but figuring leaving it is the better option right now. As they start walking, Raine hums a song just loud enough for the kids to barely hear it, mostly for themselves but also sure that a little of their calming magic can seep into the music and calm the two of them down. They reassure Gus every time he points out a landmark, making periodic glances at Willow, who is not being eased by their progress. They don't know how to help, though, and the last thing they need right now is to stop again because Raine doesn't have their full attention on Gus. This is *so* stressful, they don't know how Eda does it so easily.

Finally, they reach a big gate, Raine looking up to see the top reading 'Looking Glass Graveyard'. They sigh in relief, rubbing Gus' shoulder before drawing their hand back.

"Great job, Gus, I knew you knew where we were going," They reassure him, Gus looking back and smiling.

"Yeah, yeah I did know," He nods, looking back into the graveyard before adding, less enthusiastic this time, "Do we have a plan to get the stones?"

"Can we just go in there and take it? Is the caretaker even watching?" Willow questions, admittedly a little more aggressive than Raine has heard her so far.

"Yeah, he's uh, watching all the time. I know him, though, so I can easily distract him by telling him I'm just checking in on how he is," Gus reasons, thinking a minute before he lights up, eagerly explaining to Willow, "And I'll cast an illusion over the statue on the far left and all I need you to do is have a plant grab one of the stones, suck it through the floor, and pop up here. Boom! Galdorstone for us."

"Ok, yeah, let's do it," Willow agrees, neither of them consulting Raine before putting their plan into action. Raine, admittedly, doesn't butt in at all, feeling the kids' dismissal of them sting a bit. They figure all they can do is just watch them work, getting ready if they need to help out at all. Raine positions themselves behind a nearby tree, looking into the graveyard to keep an eye on both kids.

The kids don't even hesitate to start working, though, Willow stepping into the graveyard and hiding behind another statue as Gus walks in and calls for the caretaker. He appears almost immediately, Gus holding a hand behind his back with the small mirror he keeps in his ear piercing pointing out, dimly glowing light blue. The caretaker looks around suspiciously for a moment, but once Gus gets him wrapped up in a conversation he puts his full focus on him. Raine sees Willow draw a circle, and a moment later a Galdorstone pops out of the ground in front of her. She hurries out of the graveyard, drawing another circle to summon a very small plant right at Gus' feet, out of view of the caretaker, and tapping him on the back of the ankle. Gus bids his goodbyes to the man, keeping up the illusion as he walks out of the graveyard, back up to Willow outside it. Raine goes up to them, too, although they don't say anything. It feels really awkward, not having contributed at all but still needing to be here to chaperone these kids. They just smile anyway, though, as the kids give each other a high five, some human thing that Eda taught Raine recently.

"Yeah, super easy," Gus brags, letting the illusion over the graveyard fade, "Now we just need to get back, which is way easier than getting here. No need to sweat, I got this under control."

Willow chuckles, "Alright, lead the way then."

"I'll put the stone in the bag," Raine tells them, Willow handing them the stone to put in the backpack Eda lent them. Once the stone is safe in the bag, Gus and Willow start their walk back, Raine continuing to trail behind them. Surprisingly, though, Gus looks back at them, motioning to come up closer. They walk up beside Gus, who looks over at them.

“So Raine, while we walk do you want to fill us in on what happened while we were gone?” He asks, “We kinda just got thrown into all of this but the last time we were here the Owl House had been gutted, what happened?”

“Well, Eda went to the Bonesborough Precinct, where they took all the stuff in the Owl House, and essentially just stole all of it back. I’m actually not super sure how she did it, one day we didn’t have furniture and the next day we did. Honestly, after a while you learn not to question anything Eda does,” Raine chuckles, “But we’ve been using the Owl House as a fort of sorts for a couple of months now, it’s out of reach of the Collector, who has a mind control spell cast over the entire of Bonesborough, and it’s fortified well. I don’t think anyone wants to get anywhere near Hooty.”

Gus laughs, “Yeah, if I’m honest, I don’t think Hooty has ever stopped scaring me, no matter how much I talk to him.”

“But wait, the Collector did what?” Willow questions, leaning forward to look at Raine.

“Oh, yeah, you weren’t here for that,” They remember, “Uh, they kind of started to mind control all of Bonesborough, if you stand up high enough you can see the spell. He's been staying pretty contained, luckily, but none of us can go in there except Eda and Lilith, because anyone magical will get brought right under the spell. We’re pretty sure everyone in there is ok, from what we’ve seen, they’re just, well, not in control of anything.”

“Can you get them out?” She asks.

“We haven’t tried yet. Eda has been trying to brew an antidote for the spell but she hasn’t perfected it yet,” Raine tells them, “We can’t just pull people out, we need to unlatch their mind from the Collector too.”

“So how did you guys get out?” Gus questions, “All the coven heads, and Amity’s dad?”

“None of us were ever under it, Eda brought all of us back right after the Day of Unity, and she found Alador in the woods somewhere while out scouting for Luz and you all,” Raine explains, “I don’t remember it at all, I was, well, out of commission for a while after that. The draining spell had a pretty bad effect on me.”

“Oh yeah, what happened to Eda’s hand?” Gus asks, “I swear she had two normal ones when we left.”

“Oh, that’s uh, a story for Eda to tell I think,” Raine awkwardly dismisses, not really wanting to tell them about how they broke off Eda’s hand. She’s long forgiven them for it, considering it saved her life, but they still feel bad.

Gus looks at them suspiciously but relents, instead asking, “Do you guys have a plan to stop the Collector?”

Raine rubs the back of their neck, before shaking their head, “No, not at all. We have no idea what we’re going to do, actually. We’re really happy you guys made it back, though, from whatever you were doing in the Human Realm.”

“Oh Titan, the Human Realm is *amazing* ,” Gus gushes, “They have all this cool stuff and the rain there doesn’t boil and I got to see a real giraffe. A real one! I understand why we got rid of those guys, though, they’re freaks. Camila made us all this human food too, like, did you know Flapjack is named after an actual food? They’re called pancakes but sometimes people call them flapjacks and that must be where he got his name. I don’t know how, though, if he was a witch’s palisman,

but I guess they learned that somehow."

Raine laughs, "Well, were they good?"

"Oh yeah, really good. They're served with maple syrup that's super sweet on top of it, they're so good. Camila made them all the time for us," Gus enthusiastically tells them, "And they have this series called Cosmic Frontier all about these travelers in space trying to get back home and fighting all these enemy planets to protect the universe. Hunter and I are really into it, that's what the costume is for," Gus gestures to the costume he has on, very similar to the one Hunter had tied around his waist, "He went as Chief O'Bailey and I went as Captain Avery. Humans dress up for this holiday called Halloween, it's a lot like our-"

"Hey guys, can we go a bit faster? It's getting late," Willow cuts in, Gus looking over at her before picking up his pace a bit. He stays quiet as Willow looks up above them before looking back at Raine and asking, "Are you sure we can't fly?"

"It's too dense here, we need to stay low if we fly and we'd have to get above the trees," Raine tells her, Willow sighing and crossing her arms.

"Yeah, ok, let's just go faster," She hopelessly clips back, Raine feeling the overwhelming feeling that this is a moment where they should reassure her. Better now than never, they figure.

"Everything will be ok, we got what we needed and that's the hard part," Raine reasons, "I'm sure Hunter is fine, Hettie is working on him."

"But there's nothing they can do until we get back," She argues, "What if we take too long and it's *our* fault something happens?"

"I promise you nothing is going to happen, we're doing what we can," They calmly reply, "I know it's stressful but we can't do anything but what we are right now."

Willow doesn't say anything, just looking away from Raine and Gus as they continue to walk, a bit faster than before. They walk in silence this time, though, Willow's worrying seemingly killing Gus' enthusiasm. Raine keeps a close eye on her as they walk, very clearly seeing her trying to push back at the worry that something is going to happen to Hunter. They can't go much faster than this, though, as much as Raine wishes they could run they know that's not sustainable or good for either of these kids, who they're sure are gonna crash tonight after all this. They just keep up their good pace, walking quietly next to Gus and Willow.

After another ten minutes of walking, Willow is starting to go from nervous to tearful. Raine doesn't say anything, for the sake of her own privacy, but they see her turning away and wiping her eyes every few seconds. Gus doesn't seem to notice, as she only does it when he looks away. Raine sees it, though, and hopes that they won't need to be the one to help if she does start crying. Not because they don't want to, but more so because they're *way* too awkward for that. They'd *definitely* say the completely wrong thing.

Finally, the Owl House comes into view as they exit the last leg of their journey, the two kids both running back to the house. Raine runs to keep up with them, Willow being the first to rush inside. She stops though, Raine coming up behind her and Gus to see that only Luz and Amity are back, Luz on the couch with her mom and Amity talking to her dad. They all look over when the three of them walk into the room.

"Where are Lilith and Eberwolf?" Willow asks, "Did they come back?"

Luz shakes her head, “Not yet, we got back maybe half an hour ago? They haven’t gotten here yet.”

Willow’s shoulder slump as she walks over to sit herself down on the further side of the loveseat from Luz, who is sitting on the couch. Gus walks over to sit down with Willow, Raine just letting them sort that out themselves. They head down the hall and into the kitchen, where Eda is mumbling to herself as she brews something in a small cauldron. Sitting on top of the other cauldron is Owlbert, just quietly watching Eda.

“Hey,” Raine greets, Eda looking up, “I come with a gift.”

Eda smiles at them, coming around the counter to stand right in front of them, “The kids didn’t desert you, Rainestorm, good to see.”

“They almost did at the end,” They laugh, “Went running off towards the house, they are *fast* .”

“You should try to keep up with Luz, it’s impossible,” She rolls her eyes, holding out her hand, “Now where is my gift, my faithful subject?”

“Courtesy of two teenage children, I present to you,” Raine takes the bag off their back, taking out the Galderstone, “A Galdorstone.”

Eda takes it from them, jokingly cooing, “Ooo, a blue shiny thing, I’ve always wanted one of these.”

“Well you’re quite welcome then,” They tease, Eda laughing and putting the stone on the counter behind her.

“So, how did it go?” She asks, “Good, I’m assuming, since you got what you went out there for.”

“Yeah, it went pretty good,” They nod, sighing, “Willow is worked up, though, the whole time she was trying to get us to go faster. She’s really worried about Hunter, is something going on between them or is she just a worrier?”

Eda shrugs, going back around the counter to continue brewing, Raine pulling out a stool to sit on and watch her. “I don’t know her that well, honestly. I definitely should, she’s one of Luz’s best friends, but from what I’ve seen she’s pretty level-headed. She and Hunter, though, I have no idea. I’ve gotta ask Luz at some point because she seems pretty protective over him. When he was yelling earlier she jumped right to his defense.”

“Yeah, I think she was crying on our way back, but it didn’t seem like she wanted anyone to see. I didn’t comment on it, I figured she probably wanted to just be left alone,” Raine tells her, “Gus freaked himself out too, he got in his own head and thought we were lost and got really worked up. I don’t know how you keep Luz calm so effortlessly.”

“Hey, it’s not effortless, I’ll tell you that much,” She replies, “She’s upset with me, I think. She came in here earlier and I kind of brushed her off, it’s my fault, but I figured she wanted to be with her mom. Luz has a tendency to feel like she needs to help and I didn’t want me to keep her from sitting out there with her mom.”

“ *You* have a tendency to do that too, though. Assume people don’t want to be around you,” Raine points out, Eda sighing.

“Alright, let’s analyze my behavior patterns later,” She dismisses, pausing a moment before continuing, “Did you hear Flapjack when you came in? He’s been out there twittering in pain for

almost an hour my dad said, he just won't stop," Eda tells them, stirring the cauldron in front of her, "The adhesive for his wing is almost done, it just needs to simmer for another couple of minutes," She glances up at the clock, sighing, "Then it's go time, I guess."

"He's probably in a lot of pain, those gashes looked really bad before," Raine sympathizes, "But he'll be fine soon."

"Titan, Raine, I don't know, I don't think I can carve him a new wing," She sighs, stopping what she's doing and looking up at Raine, visibly stressed.

"You've carved palismen before though, Eda, I don't think you need to worry about making one wing," Raine reasons, Eda shaking her head.

"I've carved palismen before when I had *magic* , Luz's egg doesn't count. A big part of carving is being able to feel when things are right and symmetrical, I don't think I'm going to be able to do that anymore."

"Well, you don't know that," Raine counters, "Maybe it still works like that, you didn't become completely magicless, your curse just messes with it."

"No, I'm pretty much magicless," She argues, "I don't know, I really can't mess this up. If I hurt this bird I don't think Hunter is going to *ever* forgive me, from what I've seen he loves that bird with everything that he has. He was willing to let himself not get help so we'd focus on Flapjack, I don't think hurting him will go over too great."

"I think you'll do just fine, Don't stress about it too much," Raine assures her, Eda just looking back down and stirring, a tense expression on her face. Raine gets up and comes around the counter, walking up to wrap their arms around her waist, resting their head up on her shoulder. Eda leans her head to the side to rest against theirs.

"I don't know, I just really can't mess this up. Everyone is relying on me to fix him and it's *my* fault that my dad can't do it so if I mess it up then just everything is my fault and-"

"Eda," Raine stops her, turning her to face them, leaving a hand on her waist and smiling, "It'll be ok, you just need to trust yourself. You can do this, and your dad is still there to help you if you need it. Just breathe, it'll all work out."

Eda nods, pulling Raine into a hug. Raine calmingly rubs her back, the two lingering there for a moment before she steps back, going back to what she was brewing before. Raine goes back into the position they were in before, arms around her waist and head propped up on her shoulder. She looks over at them and smiles, resting her forehead on their head for a moment before looking back at what she's doing. They stay like that for a few minutes before they hear footsteps down the hall, Raine rushing to step back and put a foot between them and Eda. Luz appears in the doorway right after they pull away, looking suspiciously between the two of them before stepping in further.

"Eda, is the glue ready yet?" She asks, Eda sticking a finger into the pot and pulling back out a bit of brown sticky liquid, toying with it in her hand before nodding.

"Yeah, it's ready, tell my dad I'll be in in a minute," She tells her, Luz nodding before walking out and back into the living room. All it takes is one glance from Eda for Raine to tell that she's really nervous, Raine walking over and wrapping an arm around her waist, leaning forward a bit to look at her.

"Hey, you got this, alright? Just trust yourself," They smile, Eda nodding.

“Yeah, I got this,” She affirms herself looking over at Raine and smiling, “Thanks, Rainestorm.”

“Of course,” They return the smile, the two staying there, faces awfully close for a moment before Eda pulls away, picking up the small cauldron and nodding her head towards the far counter.

“Can you grab the wood out of that bag?” She asks, Raine going over and taking the piece of palistrom wood out of the bag. It’s not huge but it’s a decently sizable piece, definitely not stingy on the Bat Queen’s part. They follow Eda back into the living room, Owlbert flying after her, where she sets down the cauldron of adhesive on the coffee table and takes the wood from Raine, putting it on the table too. Amity has moved to sit on the couch, Alador having left the room. Eda’s dad looks up at her.

“Is the adhesive ready, witchling?” He asks, Eda nodding.

“Yeah, it is,” She nods.

Dell sighs, looking back at the bird he’s scratching with one hand and telling him, “Ok, buddy, we gotta unwrap you so we can see what we need to do, ok? I know it hurts, but it’s almost over.”

Flapjack tweets at him, Dell slowly starting to unwrap the bandage from around him. Raine leans over, putting a hand on Eda’s shoulder so they can see him getting unwrapped. They cringe when they see more green magic on the bandage than there should be Dell looking up at Eda nervously.

“I don’t think we can take his wing off when he’s in wood, this is worse than I thought it would be,” He tells her, “He’s not going to have enough magic to turn back from wood with these leaking gashes.”

Raine looks over at Eda, seeing how panicked she looks and rubbing her shoulder. Eda stammers a bit, “Dad I- I mean I can’t- I can’t cut his wing off like this, I carve wood, not living birds.”

Dell looks back down at the bird in front of him, who chirps something at him. A beat of silence goes by before someone speaks up, Raine looking up to surprisingly see Luz’s mom chime in.

“I mean, is he a normal bird?” She asks, “Like, with normal anatomy and everything?”

“Yes? I mean, palismen are just normal animals when they’re not wood, yes,” Dell hesitantly answers, “I don’t know what human birds are like.”

“He just looks like a regular cardinal, if he is I can amputate his wing,” She offers, “I’m a vet, I work with birds very often.”

Dell squints at her confused, “Sorry, a what?”

“Oh, you don’t have those here? It’s just a doctor for animals, so I work with birds like him all the time. I’ve amputated wings before, too, so I can do it,” She offers, Dell looking up at Eda before looking back at Luz’s mom and nodding.

“Yeah, it’s our best shot,” He agrees, Luz’s mom getting up and walking over to look at the bird, taking a hair tie off her wrist and tying up her hair. As he debriefs her on the workings of palismen, Eda looks around at all the kids in the room, who are all now sitting on the couch and the loveseat.

“Alright, none of you should be watching this, Raine is going to take you to wait upstairs,” She tells them, Luz going to argue but Eda stopping her before she even says anything, “No arguing, I’m *not* letting you stay in here. You can come back when he’s patched up, ok? Go with Raine.”

Luz sighs but gets up off the couch, Raine walking towards the doorway to the hallway and letting them all go ahead, flashing Eda a reassuring smile before following the kids down the hall and up the stairs. The kids all sit down in the hallway, Raine leaning against the wall by the stairs and keeping an eye on them so none try to go out and see what's happening, but they don't say much. The kids all start talking to each other, worried whispers about how Flapjack is going to be. Admittedly, Raine is nervous too, but they try not to show it too much, periodically flashing Luz a smile when she looks up at them for reassurance. They can't hear anything going on downstairs, though, so all they can do is hope that things are going well.

The last thing they need for group morale is to not have Flapjack make a full recovery.

Secrets, Secrets Are No Fun

Chapter Notes

> small cw for cutting off flapjack's wing at the beginning. it's two paragraphs and not graphic at all but it's a hard thing to picture

“Find someone to stand at the door in case your sister and Eberwolf come back, Edalyn,” Eda’s dad orders her, Eda sticking her head down the hallway and yelling.

“Darius! Come here, we need you to stand at the door!” She calls, waiting a minute before Darius comes back down the hallway, notably without his cape. He looks at her annoyed.

“What am I doing?” He questions.

“Stand outside the door and stop Lilith and Eber from bursting into the room while we’re working on Flapjack,” She tells him, “Just tell them to hang on, we’ll go out and grab you when we’re done.”

He dramatically sighs but walks over to the door, mumbling, “I’m going to punch that tube demon in the face if he speaks to me.”

“He’s going to!” Eda calls as Darius opens the door, Eda immediately hearing Hooty start to chatter to him. Eda lets Darius deal with it, going back over to her dad, who is handing Luz’s mom a scalpel. Eda takes a seat on the chair as she listens to him explain.

“This is a scalpel meant to work on live palismen. They leak magic, see here, this will seal the wound as you cut,” He explains, handing it to her, “I don’t know if it’s like yours in the Human Realm.”

“Well, ours don’t seal up wounds, but they look the same,” Luz’s mom replies, “Are we gonna give him something? This is really going to hurt, normally we give the animals at the clinic an anesthetic or something, to put them to sleep.”

Eda’s dad shakes his head, “No, we don’t have anything, and we couldn’t make anything fast enough that it wouldn’t risk more damage. We just need to cut it off like this.”

Flapjack chirps something at them, Eda feeling Owlbert leave her shoulder and fly over to the table. Flapjack chirps again, this time at Owlbert, who turns back to Eda and hoots at her.

“Flapjack said Flapjack is strong, Flapjack will be ok,” Owlbert tells her, *“For Hunter.”*

“Flapjack said he’ll be ok, guys,” Eda chimes into their conversation, “He said he’ll be strong, and he can do it for Hunter.”

Flapjack chirps again, seemingly in agreement, Eda’s dad scratching the bird’s head, “You’re very strong, Flapjack, I promise you’ll feel all better after this, ok?”

Flapjack chirps again, glancing at Hunter before looking back at Eda’s dad and twittering something else. Owlbert turns back to Eda and translates.

“Flapjack said Flapjack is strong again, and Flapjack will help Hunter,” Owlbert tells her, looking at her nervously, *“Owlbert thinks Flapjack is in pain.”*

“Yeah, we’re fixing it, Owlbert,” She taps her shoulder, Owlbert flying over to settle on it. Eda looks back at her dad and Luz’s mom, who are waiting for her to tell them what Owlbert said. “He just said Flapjack says he’s strong, I think he’s ok with it.”

“Alright,” Eda’s dad sighs, standing up and stepping back over to sit on the couch near where Eda is sitting, “We’re here if you need anything.”

“Uh, do you guys have gloves?” She asks, “You know, like, sterile gloves?”

“I can make you gloves,” Hettie chimes in from where she’s still hunched over Hunter, “Hold your arms out.”

Camila puts down the scalpel and hesitantly holds out her arms, Hettie taking her free hand and casting healer’s gloves onto her hands. She marvels at it for a moment before grabbing the scalpel and looking back to Flapjack, pausing before looking up between Eda and her dad. “Can he understand me?”

“Mhm, yeah, he can understand like a person can,” Eda tells her, Luz’s mom nodding and looking back at Flapjack, taking a deep breath before calmingly telling him.

“Hey buddy, I’m going to cut this wing off, ok? It’s going to hurt a lot but you need to stay still,” She tells him, Flapjack nodding and chirping at her, “Alright, you can tell Owlbert if you need me to stop, ok? But I’m just going to try to get it over with quickly too, so we don’t drag it out.”

Flapjack chirps at her, and Luz’s mom tightly smiles and holds out the wing with one hand, taking a deep breath before beginning to slice off the wing. Flapjack sits there eerily quiet as she starts, which is *starkly* different from the tweeting he’s been doing for an hour. She just keeps cutting down the spot where the wing joins to his body, Eda both really wanting to look away but also feeling like her eyes are glued to the scene. It’s really not that gory, the scalpel stopping any magic from leaking out of where the incision is. Flapjack lets out a strangled chirp, clearly trying to keep himself quiet.

“You’re very brave, Flapjack, you’re doing a very good job,” She kindly reassures him as she continues, “We can stop if you need.”

Flapjack stays quiet, only letting out a couple of tight chirps as she continues. It takes a very short amount of time, Eda surprised when she lifts up the wing with her left hand, watching as it shrivels up and vanishes. Luz’s mom looks up in shock at Eda’s dad, but he jumps to assure her.

“That’s supposed to happen, that means you did it right. It has no magic anymore, so that part shrivels up and dies,” He explains, getting up and coming over to sit down next to her, examining her work. “This looks great, though, this is perfect. We can carve a new wing right onto this, thank you so much.”

“Of course, I’m glad I could help, definitely different from what I do in the Human Realm but I’m just happy that he’s ok. But, uh, now what?” She asks, Eda sighing and standing up.

“Alright, don’t even say it, I’m ready,” Eda gets up, Luz’s mom standing up and swapping spots with Eda to sit on the armchair while Eda sits down on the floor. Her dad is sitting next to her, holding out a carving tool to her, the wood sitting on the table right next to Flapjack. Eda looks up at him, her dad giving her a warm smile.

“Trust yourself, witchlet, you can do it,” He reassures her, Eda nodding and taking the tool from him, looking at Flapjack. Eda’s dad reaches over and examines the bird one last time, nodding before telling him, “Alright, Flapjack, you’re safe to turn into wood. We’ll tell you when to come back out, wait for us.”

Flapjack chirps at him, Owlbert, still on Eda’s shoulder, translating for her. *“Flapjack is ok, Flapjack feels ok, and Flapjack listens,”* Owlbert tells her, Eda looking at her dad.

“Flapjack said he feels ok, and he’ll wait for your signal to turn back,” She tells him, her dad nodding and rubbing the bird’s head.

“Ok, buddy, wood,” He orders him, Flapjack transforming into wood, the part where his right wing should be completely flat. Eda hesitantly picks him up, beginning to feel both sides of him and get a sense of how big his wings are. She pushes back at the nervousness threatening to make her freeze up, hearing both her dad and Raine in her head telling her to just trust herself, and along with the motivating image of Hunter frantically screaming at her to fix Flapjack, she knows she can’t back out now. Owlbert stays on her shoulder, not saying anything but continuously rubbing her cheek as she assesses Flapjack, a reminder that she’s done this before, and she can do it again.

She grabs the wood and cuts off a portion of it, making it a small, half-circle shape so one side can sit up against the wooden bird. She works away at it, periodically, placing one hand on the other side of Flapjack to see how close she is. She carves for what feels like forever, going very slowly at small slivers of the wood. Her lessons with her dad haven’t left her, apparently, and she works wing down to one almost exactly the same size as the other. She holds it up to his side, putting one hand on each side of the bird.

Her dad leans in, quietly asking her, “Is it all set?”

She closes her eyes, fingers creeping around the two sides of the wooden bird. It feels wrong, and when her finger lands on the portion of the new wing that needs to be shaved down some more she immediately notices. She opens her eyes and shaves off that piece, not missing her dad’s proud smile out of the corner of his eye. She lines up the wing again, closing her eyes and feeling around. They feel completely symmetrical, Eda ignoring the part of her that says there’s something else missing. Her dad always taught her that, no matter how long she carves, there will always be a part of her that refuses to learn and feel, to trust in her own intuition, and that she can’t listen to its judgment. But the part of her that is tapped into carving, that part that’s *learned* how to carve a perfectly symmetrical palisman, *that* part says that Flapjack is ready.

“It’s right,” She opens her eyes, looking over at her dad, “It’s even.”

He beams back at her, summoning a small brush into his hands and handing it to her, encouraging her, “Well, you do the honors.”

She takes it from him, pulling the cauldron of adhesive closer and dipping the brush inside. She paints the new wing she’s made in glue, carefully sticking it onto the uncharacteristically flat spot on his side. She holds her hand there, pressing it so it sticks to the wood. Her dad’s hand comes up to lay over hers, staying there a moment before he slowly pulls both of them away, seeing the originally blue wood has already begun to shift to the red of the rest of him. The wing stays in place, her dad rubbing her shoulder.

“Fantastic job witchlet, it’s perfect,” He rubs her shoulder, “It’ll only take about five minutes to set, and then we can wake him up and wrap it and it’ll be good as new.”

Eda smiles over at him, a weird sense of relief washing over her. Definitely because she carved the

wing right, but it's not just that. She feels like she's righted a huge wrong, a 20-year-long wrong that she's been trying to outrun most of her life. She's gonna be honest, it feels *awesome* .

"I'll keep an eye on the time, you can go get Darius in from outside and let the kids come back down here," He tells her, Eda nodding and going over to the front door, opening it to see Darius standing on the other side with his ears plugged, Hooty rambling on and on about something completely incomprehensible.

"Hey, freeloader, you're welcome back inside now. The bird is all done," She calls out, Darius sighing in relief and walking back inside.

"You owe me *so* much for that one, Owl Lady," He clips at her, Eda shutting the door when he comes in and poking back.

"I don't owe you squat, keep saying that and I'll throw you into the kid's dollhouse game, the threat is constant and *always* on the table for you, neat freak," She teases, Darius dramatically putting a hand on his head and sighing.

"Well, at least get me dressed up nice before you do it," He answers, going back down the hall and into the tower. Eda goes in the other direction, instead heading upstairs to fetch Raine and the kids. They all go dead silent when she gets up near the time, looking down the hallway to see Raine leaning on the wall closest to the stairs. Luz and Amity are sitting on one wall, Willow and Gus on the one facing them. They all look over, including Raine who steps closer when Eda comes up the stairs.

"Flapjack is all done, he's going to be perfectly fine. The new wing is already taking on his color," She assures them, the group collectively sighing in relief. Eda steps out of the way of the stairs, gesturing down the stairs, "You're welcome to wait in the living room, he'll be able to turn back into his bird form in five minutes."

All the kids get up off the ground, heading downstairs. Luz is the last, looking up at Eda for a moment before throwing her arms around Eda. She doesn't say anything, Eda just rubbing her back and trying to reassure her.

"Flapjack is going to be just fine, and Hunter too. Everything will be alright, kid, you don't need to worry," Eda tells her, "We'll figure it all out."

Luz steps back and looks up at her, giving her a small, halfhearted smile. Eda is bothered by the sight, something about her expression feeling really off. Eda doesn't get to place it, though, before Luz goes back off down the stairs, Eda looking up at Raine.

"That felt weird," She says, "Did that feel weird to you?"

"It definitely felt off, but they've all had long days, she's probably just tired," Raine reasons, Eda nodding but not completely buying that as the explanation. Raine comes over to her and smiles, though, taking her attention off of what happened with Luz and instead focusing it on Raine in front of her, who tells her, "I knew you could do it."

"And I heard you telling me that the *whole* time," She jokingly tells them, although it's completely true. They just laugh and pull her into a hug, one distinctly tighter than Luz's just now. It doesn't linger for more than a moment, though, Raine offering her a hand, which Eda takes, and guiding her downstairs. She drops it, though, right before getting into the living room, *not* wanting the kids to get all wrapped up in how Raine and Eda's relationship has been, well, different recently. Eda *also* doesn't want an overenthusiastic Luz getting the wrong idea either, because they really *aren't*

together. They're just a bit close is all.

All of the kids are sitting around the coffee table, Luz's mom, at some point having taken off her gloves, is sitting on the armchair, chatting with Eda's dad. Amity and Luz are on the couch and Willow and Gus are on the loveseat next to it, just as they were before. Eda walks over and grabs a seat on the wall by the front door, Raine following and sitting down next to her. Owlbert, who has been hovering around Eda to probably make sure she's ok, flies off over to the table to sit by Flapjack. Eda and Raine keep a bit of distance between the two of them, Eda not really feeling up to talking about anything. Raine doesn't push, either, just letting the two of them sit in silence. She figures Lilith and Eberwolf will be back soon, so, since she can see Hunter and Flapjack from where she's sitting, she thinks it's ok to sit for a little bit.

Five minutes later she sees her dad pick up Flapjack in his wood form, moving him around and examining the new wing, which has completely changed color to match his body. The moment he picks him up everybody in the room goes quiet, watching anxiously for his assessment of the bird. He just smiles, though, looking over at Eda and holding him up.

"He looks perfect, right?" He asks, Eda nodding.

"It looks like the wing stuck on good, it's the same color," She agrees, her dad nodding.

"I think it's time to wake him up now, the moment of truth," He puts a hand on Flapjack's new wing before tapping his other side, saying, "Come out of wood, buddy."

Flapjack transforms back into a bird, Eda's dad keeping him firmly between his hands so he can't try to flap his new, delicate wing. Flapjack does look over at it, though, tweeting at her dad very happily, a *distinctly* different sound from the pained chirps he'd been letting out for an hour.

"That wing seems to have taken just fine, Flapjack, but you can't use it just yet," He tells him, drawing a circle with his finger and summoning some bandages. He carefully begins to wrap up the wing, Eda watching as he does it in a way that goes around his good wing so he still has the ability to use it. He finishes quickly though, scratching Flapjack on the head and praising him, "You were very brave today, buddy, and you're all set now. You should be able to move the wing in about a week, and you can use it like normal in two."

Flapjack cheerfully tweets at him, rubbing up into his hand before turning around, hopping over to where Luz is sitting. She smiles, holding out her cupped hands for him to jump into. He settles into them, Luz petting him with her thumb.

"I'm glad you're ok, little guy," She tells him, Flapjack tweeting up at her. "Yeah, you are very brave and very strong," She scratches him, beaming down at the bird. It's the happiest that Eda has seen her since she got back here, and realistically for at least a couple of weeks before she left too. Eda has no idea what happened back in the Human Realm, but this Luz is a lot less animated than the one she remembers. Hopefully, after all of this blows over, she gets to sit down and talk to her about everything that happened.

Eda's dad gets up off the ground and grabs the cauldron off the coffee table, looking over at Eda. "Where are your bottles, witchlet? I don't want to waste this adhesive."

"They're in the cabinet below the sink in the kitchen," She tells him, "Do you need help?"

"No, I've got it," He smiles, "Just keep an eye on Flapjack for me."

"Will do," She affirms, her dad going off into the other room.

Everyone is in pretty high spirits for about ten minutes before the positive feelings of saving Flapjack start to wear off, the room growing really tense. Luz is continuously throwing anxious looks over at the door, Amity leaning her head on her girlfriend's shoulder, eyes starting to drift closed. Gus is toying with his hands in his lap, periodically letting his head fall as he dozes off. Willow is next to him, having turned to completely face away, almost trying to fold in on herself. Eda can't help but be nervous, too, because this is taking *way* longer than she feels like it should.

Finally, after over half an hour of waiting, Willow speaks up, her voice weak and wavering. "Luz, where was the time pool when you found it?"

"Uh, just on the beach around here, but Lilith said we just got lucky. The next one could be across the world, we don't know," Luz nervously answers, Willow staring at her in almost disbelief. She looks back down at Hunter before getting up and walking off, Gus perking up at her leaving and getting up and going after her. Eda just sighs, trying not to think too much about what Luz said. She does move closer to Raine, though, against her better judgment, leaning her head on their shoulder. It earns the two of them a glance from Luz, although she seems too preoccupied to care much right now. She just goes back to petting the bird in her lap. Raine wraps an arm around Eda, all of them continuing to sit in silence. Eda watches as Hettie begins to falter a bit, though, the circle she's maintained for over an hour wavering. She immediately gets up and goes over to her, Hettie looking up.

"What?" She questions, clearly tired.

"I have replenishing potions lying around, do you want me to grab you one?" Eda asks, Hettie staring at her a moment before sighing.

"Please," She requests, Eda going off into the kitchen to grab two out of her cabinet stash of stuff she's been brewing for the past couple of months. She comes back in and hands it to her, Hettie downing it with her free hand. The circle that had previously been fading a bit regains its dark color. Eda puts the other vial on the ground next to her, pointing at it.

"If you feel weak again drink that," She says, "I'll get you another if you need it."

"Mhm," She hums, Eda really off put by how little of a fight Hettie is putting up with her. Normally she *always* has something smart to say, but she seems like she's edging on exhausted right now, which is the last thing they need. There's nothing Eda can do, though, just retaking her seat next to Raine, who goes back to wrapping an arm around her. Eda cuddles up closer than she probably should, but she really wants to be sitting with Raine right now, so she hopes the kids aren't looking too closely.

Another half an hour goes by of nothing, no one getting up or moving at all, except for when Hettie drinks her second potion. About fifteen minutes ago Willow and Gus came back in, and Eda can tell Willow was just crying. No one says anything, though, all seemingly so in their own heads that they're not up to talking about anything. The silence is horribly deafening, which is why all of them perk up when they hear Hooty start talking outside. Eda jumps up and opens the door, looking over at Hooty.

"We have a special guest coming up the path for us!" He tells her, Eda looking down the path and squinting to see Eberwolf running to the door, bag in his teeth. He skids to a stop right outside the door, looking up at Eda, who bends down to take the bag from him. He squeaks up at her before rushing by, going off down the hall and probably into the tower. She barely processes that it happened, Luz snapping her out of it.

"Are the lungs in there?" She asks, Eda opening up the bag to see Stonesleeper lungs inside,

looking back and nodding.

“Yeah, they are,” She starts towards the kitchen, grabbing the palistrom wood off the coffee table as she rushes by and going into the kitchen, noting that her dad isn’t in here. She has no idea where he went, but now isn’t the time to worry about that. Instead, she sets out the three ingredients, looking up when Luz walks into the room. Eda looks at her confused, “What’s up, kid?”

“I want to help,” She tells her, “Let me help, Eda, please.”

Eda sighs but nods, “Ok, grab me the knife out of that drawer over there, please, the purple sharp one.”

Luz does as she’s told, coming back with Eda’s really sharp-cutting knife. “Thank you,” Eda tells her as she slices off pieces of all three ingredients, dropping them into the cauldron. She grabs the other stirring stick off the table and hands it to Luz.

“Can you stir this pot for me, please? Nice and slow,” She tells her, Luz listening. She doesn’t say anything about it, either, Eda noting it as *really* weird. Luz *despises* stirring, normally she’ll beg Eda to do anything else. But she doesn’t put up a fight at all, and although Eda would love to grill her about it she just leaves it for now, instead working on finding the perfect balance of Stonesleeper lung, Galderstone, and palistrom wood to make this potion work. Every few seconds she holds out a hand for Luz to stop and takes the stick, picking it up to see if it’s still sticking to the stirrer. They repeat that another few times before Eda picks up the stick and the liquid acts like water, Eda nodding.

“Alright, that’s set, can you keep stirring while I grab a bottle for it?” She asks, Luz nodding and continuing to stir around the potion. Eda goes over to the cabinet across the room and takes out a bottle, going back over to the cauldron and Luz immediately stopping, stepping back so Eda can slowly fill the bottle with the potion she brewed. Once she’s done, she swirls it around and holds it above her head so she can look at the bottom, seeing the telltale glimmer of healing potions and smiling. “Great job, kid, thanks for your help. Let’s go patch your friend back up, come on.”

Luz walks back out of the room, Eda *hating* how quiet she is. Luz always has something to say but right now she’s said almost nothing. She just flags it as another reason they need to talk about how her last couple of months have been. Right now is really not the time, though, so Eda just follows her back into the living room, Luz stopping and looking back at her, Eda knowing she’s about to ask to help more.

“Sit over there on the couch, I’ve got it,” She reassures her, Luz walking over to sit back next to her girlfriend, who is now awake and has been holding Flapjack while she’s been gone. Luz takes him back, though. Eda kneels down in front of Hunter, taking a deep breath before beginning to order people around, “Ok, so, here’s what’s gonna work. You,” She points at Hettie, “Are going to wake him up while you,” She points over at Raine across the room, who gets up and comes closer when Eda points at them, “Are going to play whatever you were playing before. No one can make *any* noise, he’s going to be a little out of it and the hope is that if he doesn’t see or hear anyone-”

Eda is cut off by the door swinging open, Hooty loudly and annoyingly cheering, “Lulu is back from her dangerous quest!”

“Oh Hootsifer, it was amazing, the Heck-”

“Lilith Clawthorne, you are *so* lucky you didn’t come back thirty seconds later or I would have blasted you with the first glyph combo I thought of,” She threatens her, getting up and walking closer.

“Your glyph combos are uncalculated at best,” Lilith comments, raising an eyebrow at her, “What will that achieve?”

“Everything I want it to,” She tells her, pointing towards the hallway, “Now, no thanks to your lack of urgency, we’ve finally made the potion to fix Hunter and you are *not* invited to the awakening party, take your nightly chat with Hooty back to your room and *don’t* come back down here, I swear if you’re the reason he freaks out Lily-”

“I got it, I got it,” She dismisses her as she walks further into the room, looking back at Hooty and smiling, “I can tell you about it upstairs.”

“Ok!” Hooty answers, slamming the front door. Lilith just heads right upstairs, Eda sighing and pinching the bridge of her nose a moment before continuing her instructions as she goes to sit back down on the ground in front of Hunter.

“As I was saying,” She annoyedly starts, “ *Hopefully* if he doesn’t hear anyone else he won’t think about Flapjack because if he does that’s it, he’s never drinking this. Got it?”

The kids all nod, Eda looking over at Raine. They summon their violin, sitting down and beginning to play the same calming tune from before. Eda looks at Hettie to wake Hunter up, which she does very slowly. His eyes flutter open, Eda very calmly and quietly greets him.

“Hey, kid, I have something for you to make you feel better,” She tells him, reaching forward to help him sit up. She holds his head deliberately so he can’t turn it to the side to look around. He’s clearly still not fully awake, eyes drooping low as he very sleepily asks her.

“What?” He questions, still breathless like before, “What happened?”

“I have something for you,” She tells him, holding up the bottle, “It’s just going to help you feel better, ok? It’s not thick or anything, here, see?”

She holds the bottle in front of him, swirling it a bit for him to see, He squints at it, going to say something but getting cut off by a painful cough. He tries to reach out for it, although he barely lifts his arms.

“Here, I’ll help,” She moves up to sit right beside him, keeping one hand behind his head and bringing the bottle up to his lips, telling him, “Drink nice and slow.”

He hums in affirmation, Eda beginning to give him the potion. She does a little bit at first, taking it away and letting him swallow and take a breath. She gives him a moment before giving him some more, repeating this process until he finishes the bottle, Eda letting out a sigh of relief that he *didn’t* realize anything else was going on.

“Great job, kid, try to take deep breaths, expand your lungs the best you can,” She tells him, although she has no idea if it works like that. She makes potions, she’s not a healer. When she looks at Hettie for confirmation, though, she nods, taking back her hand from where she’s been healing him for nearly two hours. She looks at Hunter nervously for a moment before letting out a huge sigh of relief, leaning back on her hands and catching her breath a bit. Eda puts her focus back on Hunter, smiling when she sees he’s starting to take deeper breaths.

Although the moment she does, she hears the chirp of a particular bird who was *supposed* to be quiet, Hunter immediately perking straight up and exclaiming.

“Flapjack!” He looks back behind him, scrambling to get up and run over to him. He immediately stumbles forward, though, Eda needing to jump up and put a hand on the corner of the table so he

doesn't hit his head. He falls back onto the ground, Eda rubbing his shoulder.

"Woah, kid, slow down. He's right there, Luz will bring him to you," She tells him, looking up at Luz. She gets up and walks around the table, crouching down and handing Flapjack to him, smiling.

"I kept him nice and safe for you, he's been hanging out with me," She smiles, Hunter beaming back at her, looking down at Flapjack now in his hands.

"You're ok, you're ok," He repeats, almost laughing and bringing the bird up to his face, letting Flapjack rub against him. Eda lets the moment sit and linger for a little bit, watching as Flapjack happily tweets at Hunter, who, although smiling from ear to ear, starts crying. The room that had been so silent and tense for so long finally begins to relax, funnily enough at the sound of the boy they were trying to save *crying* . It's so relieving, though, to know that at least right now they're both ok.

After a minute or so Hunter looks around the room, up at his friends sitting around him, all with expressions brighter than Eda has seen them all night.

"How do you feel, Hunter? Do you feel ok?" Luz asks him, Hunter taking a moment to process before answering.

"I'm, uh, I'm ok, yeah," He nods, "I'm ok. How long has it been?"

Luz looks up at Eda for an answer, Eda crouching down next to Hunter, who worriedly looks over at her.

"What happened? Is everything ok? How long has it been?" He begins to frantically question, Eda jumping to calm him down.

"Deep breaths, kid, let's get you sitting on the couch. There's a couple of things we need to talk about," She tells him, Hunter's expression absolutely killing her. His face drops completely, eyebrows turning up as tears prick at his eyes, definitely sad ones this time. He looks back over at Luz, who looks *extremely* guilty. He doesn't say anything, though, just looking back at Eda and giving her a shallow, wordless nod. Eda glances around at all of the exhausted kids in front of her and sighs before looking back at Raine sitting on the floor behind her, who stops playing. "Think you can get them all situated in free rooms upstairs? You know where the sleeping bags and stuff are, right?" She asks.

"Mhm, yeah, I got it," They nod, getting up and beckoning to the kids, "Come on, it's late, let's get you guys places to sleep."

Luz looks like she's going to argue but surprisingly stays quiet, getting up along with her other four friends to follow Raine upstairs. Eda turns to Luz's mom, who is still sitting on the chair, pointing back towards where the kids left down the hall and telling her, "Raine will get a room for you, too. We don't have much but it's something."

"Mhm, thank you, Eda," She smiles at her, getting up and following after the group that just left. Eda lets them get upstairs before she says anything, preparing herself for a *very* hard conversation about what happened while he was out. She decides it's now or never, though, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Let's get you on the couch, kid."

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Hunter lets Eda lower him down onto the couch, immediately holding his hands out for Flapjack, who Eda made him put on the table. He hops right into Hunter's hand.

"Hunter ok, Hunter better , " Flapjack happily chirps.

"Mhm, I'm better, buddy, and you too," He scratches his head with his hand, looking up when Eda pulls back the coffee table a bit and sits down on it. The room is completely empty with the exception of him, her, and Flapjack. Hettie was dismissed back to her room, and from how completely exhausted she looked he thinks it's been a long time since they got here. He doesn't get the chance to ask again, though, as Eda begins to calmly explain to him.

"So, you were out for about two hours, Hettie was keeping you stable while we went out and got the stuff to heal you. But, uh, we, well-"

"You know," He firmly cuts her off, Eda nodding.

"Yeah, we do, but we *needed* to know. If Luz and Darius didn't tell us what they did we wouldn't've been able to help you," She tells him, Hunter furrowing his eyebrows at her.

"Darius knows?" He questions, the sinking feeling in his chest growing, "How does he know?"

"That's a question for him, kid, but it makes no difference to us. The fact that you're a Gr-"

"Stop," He cuts her off, but Eda just shakes her head at him.

"No, we need to talk about it, because you being a Grimwalker doesn't change *anything* with *any* of us. We all see you the same as we did before, and I guarantee you that no one is going to act differently."

He tries to swallow down the lump in the back of his throat at the sound of *that* word, really not in the mood to listen to more of Eda's comforting right now. He just looks down into his lap, where Flapjack is settled in his hands, quietly asking her, "Can I be alone?"

"Uh, I really don't think that's a great idea after-"

"Can I be alone?" He repeats, feeling tears start to pool in his eyes again, Hunter looking up at her and brokenly pleading, "Please?'

She sighs, "Alright, just stay put. And yell if you need anything, I'll come by in fifteen minutes or so just to make sure you're still upright and breathing."

He nods, watching as she walks out of the room, keeping himself together until the click of her shoes disappears down the hallway. The moment it does, though, he just starts crying, Flapjack wordlessly tweeting at him.

"I didn't want them to know that, I *really* didn't want them to know I wanted to keep it a secret!" He sobs, "And now who knows what they all think of me and how I'm just a stupid copy and I'm not even a witch and- ow, Flap, ow!"

Flapjack pecks at his hand, looking back up at Hunter when he stops talking. *"Hunter ok,"* The bird reassuringly tweets at him, *"Friends help Hunter, friends like Hunter. Flapjack saw."*

“I know, I know they do but, I don’t know, I just want them to see me as my own person, not one of Belos’ many science experiments trying to copy the same person over and over,” He moves Flapjack to one of his hands so he can wipe his eyes with the other. He thinks about what Flapjack said for a minute, trying to process it but still just being filled with dread. “I don’t know, buddy, I know they don’t and they never will but I can’t help but feel just, I don’t know, sick at the thought that all of them know,” He quietly admits.

“Friends like Hunter,” Flapjack repeats, *“Friends help Hunter, Hunter tell friends Hunter sad?”*

“No, I’m not going to tell them that, the last thing I need to do is give them ideas about how to hate me more,” He quips back, taking a deep breath to try to calm himself down a bit so he doesn’t start panicking. Considering he still kind of feels like his lungs are barely holding air, he doesn’t want to push it right now.

“Friends like Hunter!” Flapjack more firmly chirps back, *“Hunter wrong. Friends help Hunter. Tell one friend. Human girl? Smart boy? Purple hair? Owl Lady? Human mom? Pretty girl?!”* Flapjack stretches out Willow’s nickname, clearly teasing Hunter.

“Flapjack!” Hunter whines, laughing before pausing, sniffling a bit. “Maybe, I don’t know, maybe I’ll talk to someone else about it. Just, not right now. Not yet.”

“Flapjack right,” Flapjack pridefully says, Hunter just scratching his head with his free hand.

“Yeah, maybe you are,” Hunter admits, twisting his hand so he can look at the wing that’s bandaged up. “What did they do to you, buddy? How did they fix up your wing?”

“Old wing off, Flapjack new wing,” Flapjack tells him, Hunter looking at him in confusion.

“They cut the wing off?” He questions, Flapjack nodding, “And were you awake for it?”

“Yes! Flapjack strong,” Flapjack flaps out his good wing, *“Flapjack strong for Hunter!”*

“Titan, Flap, you were awake?!” Hunter stares at him shocked, “Didn’t that hurt?”

“Flapjack. Strong,” Flapjack firmly tells him again, *“Hunter know?”*

“Yeah, I know you’re strong, buddy, but that is a little much *even* for a strong bird like you,” Hunter scratches his head, laughing, “Cutting off a wing is a big deal.”

Flapjack just shakes his head, picking up his foot and pointing upward, saying, *“Flapjack hurt worse, Flapjack eye. Long time before Hunter, eye hurt worse.”*

“What did happen to your eye, buddy? When did you get that?” He asks.

“Before Hunter, Flapjack with Caleb, Caleb made Flapjack,” Flapjack starts to tell him, Hunter’s eyes widening in shock at the name, although he doesn’t cut him off. *“Caleb love Evelyn. Phillip mad, mad at Caleb. Phillip hurt Caleb and Evelyn, Flapjack try to help but…”*

“Oh, buddy,” Hunter looks down at him sadly, scratching him a bit on the side of the head before asking him, “But, who is Evelyn? Is she the witch Caleb fell in love with?”

Flapjack nods, *“Caleb pretty girl.”*

“Good to know you’ve been using that nickname for longer than I’ve had you,” Hunter laughs, Flapjack gleefully chirping at him. “But, your eye, Belos did that?”

“Yes,” Flapjack nods, *“Flapjack hurt, no friends to help. Eye stuck.”*

Hunter nods, looking down at the bird in his hands. It’s a *really* weird feeling, knowing that Flapjack used to be Caleb’s. He hates it, in a way, because that means that Hunter is really just a replacement. Flapjack was just trying to find a new Caleb, so he settled for Hunter as a lackluster copy.

“Flapjack waited, after Caleb,” Flapjack continues, drawing Hunter out of his train of thought, *“Flapjack waited for Hunter.”*

“But- But *why* ?” He questions, “Why did you want to wait for me? What’s so special about me? I can barely keep you safe, I almost got you taken so many times, I’m the reason you needed a new wing. Why didn’t you pick someone else?”

“Hunter strong,” Flapjack tells him pridefully, *“Hunter left Phillip, Hunter beat Phillip! Others lost, Flapjack knew, others not like Hunter. Hunter different. Hunter strong, Hunter brave, Hunter nice, Hunter smart. Hunter not Caleb. Hunter Hunter. Flapjack love Hunter!”*

Hunter stares down in disbelief at Flapjack, immediately starting to tear up at the *exact* thing he needed to hear right now. He doesn’t stop himself from crying, bringing his knees to his chest so he can hold Flapjack up to his face as he sobs, Flapjack just rubbing up against his cheek. He repeats it over and over and over, *‘Love Hunter’* , and every time it makes Hunter feel *so* good. It reminds him he’s not a copy, that Flapjack doesn’t love Hunter *because* of Caleb. He loves him because he’s *Hunter* , and he’s pretty sure that this is the most secure in himself that he’s felt since he found out he was nothing but a copy.

He lets himself cry for a lot longer than he’d like to admit, although after a little bit he starts to feel lightheaded, Flapjack stopping his constant chirping and moving back.

“Hunter ok?” He asks, concerned.

“Yeah, yeah I’m- I’m ok. I’m just lightheaded, I don’t know why,” He kind of breathlessly affirms, rubbing his eyes, “Yeah, yeah I’m- I’m alright.”

He looks up when he hears a knock on the wall in the hallway, seeing Eda poking her head around the corner. “Hey, not to eavesdrop but you sound like you’re not feeling good.”

“Uh, I’m uh, I’m-” He stammers, feeling like his brain is sputtering out.

“Take a deep breath, kid,” She tells him, walking into the room, “In and out.”

He listens to her, getting a good, filling breath in. She walks over and sits down next to him as he does it again, starting to feel like he’s regaining control of his body again, compared to how heavy it felt before.

“There you go, you’re good, you’re alright,” She smiles at him, Hunter looking at her confused.

“What do you want?” He questions, although not snippily. He puts his knees back down, lowering Flapjack into his lap.

“I just wanted to come out and talk to you a bit, make sure you’re feeling ok and everything,” She tells him, “Are you?”

“I’m, well, I’m feeling alright,” He shrugs, “I’ve felt worse.”

“Well from what I’ve heard you were never brought to a healer, so maybe don’t compare this to your past experiences,” She stops him, “Do you actually feel ok?”

“I mean, just a little dizzy I guess. And weak still, too,” He very shamefully admits to her, eyes down into his lap. She just puts a hand on his shoulder though, rubbing it.

“That’s very normal, the potion still has to work its magic on you, so you probably won’t feel one hundred percent for a few days. As long as you’re not in any pain it should be working right, so you need to tell me if you are” She tells him.

“Yeah, no pain,” He confirms, looking up at her, “Sorry.”

“Sorry why? What do you have to be sorry for?” She asks, laughing.

“I uh, caused you a lot of problems,” His eyes fall back down at Flapjack, turning a bit to put his back to Eda. He’s surprised, though, when she protests it.

“Why’re you turning away, kid? What’s up?” She rubs his shoulder again, Hunter looking back at her in confusion.

“I caused you a lot of trouble, I didn’t think you wanted to look at me,” He hesitantly tells her, now seriously doubting that this is a thing normal people do.

“Kid, *what* ?” She questions, staring at him in disbelief, “What do you mean I wouldn’t want to look at you? Who taught you that- Nevermind, I know who. No, first of all, you didn’t cause me any trouble, you were *dying* and obviously I was going to help you, I don’t consider that trouble. Second, never would I not want to see you, that’s ridiculous. Turn back, I want to see you.”

Hunter freezes at the sentence, looking back forward a moment as he feels new tears prick at his eyes *again* . He doesn’t want to disobey her, though, so he turns to sit facing forward again, looking up at her. She just smiles down at him, a smile of just pure happiness. Nothing else there, no ulterior motives, or attempts at persuasion. Just someone happy to see him, and Hunter fails at keeping back a couple of tears that trail down his cheeks at the thought. She just chuckles, brushing one away, a *very* foreign gesture that he doesn’t hate at all. It’s weird, to feel a hand that gentle on his face. They both look over, though, when there are footsteps down the hallway. A familiar face pokes into the room, Hunter vaguely recognizing it as the man who said he was going to help Flapjack before they put Hunter to sleep. Dell, he’s pretty sure his name is, but he isn’t positive. He just smiles warmly though.

“Hey, Hunter, I heard you’re awake, Raine came and told us,” He greets, pointing a shaky hand at Flapjack in his hands, “Did we patch him up good?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Hunter nods.

“He’s one tough bird you’ve got there,” He tells him, “But I just wanted to stop by and make sure you’re doing ok and everything. It’s getting late, though, so you should be going to bed soon, *both* of you.”

Eda just laughs, “I’m demoted back to a bedtime? After all I did today?”

“Professional carvers need their rest,” He jokes back, yawning, “Retired ones included. Well, it’s way past *my* bedtime, so I’ll see you in the morning. Goodnight, witchlet, goodnight Hunter.”

“Night Dad,” Eda replies, watching him leave before looking back at Hunter. Hunter looks at her *absolutely* confused, completely unaware that *he* was her dad. She just smiles, laughing.

“Sorry, that was my dad,” She tells him, “I’m guessing you don’t really remember him too well?”

“No, no, I don’t remember a lot from before,” He tells her.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” She nods, “Probably a bit for the better, it was hectic.”

He nods but doesn’t say anything, Eda letting the silence sit for a minute before pushing the conversation.

“How have you been doing, you know, besides the almost dying and all that?” She asks him, “I know you weren’t too thrilled about what everyone found out today, how are you feeling about that?”

“I mean, I guess I can’t change it,” He shrugs, “It’ll be alright.”

“I know it *will* be, but it doesn’t have to be now,” She counters, “It’s ok to be upset about it, it’s an upsetting thing. And hey, as bad as it is that they know before you were ready to tell them, I promise that it’s better that they know.”

“But no it isn’t,” He argues, “I’m not a person, why would I want them to know that?”

“You *are* a person, how you came to be doesn’t change that you’re a living breathing witch just like the rest of us,” She stops him, “And keeping secrets, as good as it feels in the moment, really just hurts people in the end. If there’s one thing I could go back and tell myself when I was younger, it would be to stop hiding things from people for the sake of protecting them from some kind of *real* me. It’s really not worth it.”

“Why would you know?” He furrowed his brow at her, “What do *you* know about hiding things?”

“Oh, kid, you have no idea,” She shakes her head, pausing a moment before beginning to tell him, much more solemn this time, “When I was younger I was *so* ashamed of my curse that I kept the details of it a secret from everyone. You know what happened because of it? My dad scared me and I turned into the Owl Beast and attacked him. I ruined his *life* , you saw how shaky his hands were? The reason *I* had to carve your friend here a new wing is because of what I did.”

Hunter looks at her in a bit of surprise, almost not believing that *she* did that to her dad. She keeps telling him more, though.

“And then, do you know Raine and I dated when we were younger?” She asks, Hunter nodding. “Well, I stopped telling them things, big things. I lied a lot, and mostly about the curse. I had just gotten it right around when we started dating and I hoped that if I didn’t talk about it that it would just go away. Well, not to spoil the ending but it didn’t, and it became the reason we ended up breaking up. I separated myself from my whole family, lived completely alone until I found King, and even then it was just me and him until Luz came along. I threw my life away all because I couldn’t just admit that it bothered me, that I really just wanted to talk about it with someone. I don’t want that to be you, kid, I know it’s not the same but the principle applies.”

Hunter just stares back at her, processing everything she just told him. Weirdly, he doesn’t want to jump to disagree, because she clearly does know what she’s talking about. He also isn’t in a position to, because they already know about him and he can’t take that back. He just shrugs, mumbling, “I guess.”

“Hey, I know it’s rough but you have a ton of people who are here for you,” She wraps an arm fully around his shoulder, moving a bit closer. She stops, though, both of them looking over at the doorway when they hear whispers in the hall, followed by an exaggerated shush. She just laughs,

calling, “Friends who are listening into our *conversation.* ”

They both watch as Luz slowly sticks her around the corner, drawing it back when she sees they’re both looking at her. Hunter looks over at Eda, the both of them laughing.

Eda leans over to him closer, whispering, “Are you alright with them coming in?” Hunter nods, Eda smiling and calling, “Alright, superspies, you can stop pretending you’re being quiet and come in now.”

Willow is the first to come bounding into the room, sitting down on the other side of Hunter and pulling him into a huge hug. Eda gets up to make room as Gus rushes over to join on the other side, Hunter unable to reciprocate it with his hands holding Flapjack but beaming at the feeling of his friends on either side of him. Amity comes in next, leading Luz behind her, who looks *extremely* guilty. They both sit down on the loveseat nearby, Eda heading back towards the doorway.

“Alright, be careful you guys, especially with the bird. I’ll be back down in a bit,” She tells them, walking out of the room and down the hallway. The moment she leaves both Gus and Willow start asking him questions, all about how he is and how Flapjack is and if he’s feeling ok.

“I’m ok, I’m ok,” He laughs, “Flapjack is too, he didn’t fail to tell me how strong he is a million times.”

“Flapjack strong!” He tells him again, Hunter nodding down towards him

“There he goes again,” He says, Willow smiling over at him before throwing her arms around him again.

“Thank Titan you’re ok,” She sighs in relief, Hunter taking one hand away from Flapjack to wrap it around her too. They stay there for a second before he sits back, Willow moving a bit closer to him so they’re sitting right side by side. He fights the urge to lean against her, blaming it on his fuzzy head right now. He looks over at Luz and Amity, and while Amity is smiling at him Luz is just looking down into her lap, fiddling with Amity’s hand. He looks at her concerned but chooses not to say anything, although it brings down his mood a bit seeing her so upset. He doesn’t want to bring it up right now, but he needs to remember to grab her at some point and thank her for telling them about him, and that he’s not mad about it. He, in his moment of weakness, leans a bit against Willow, and he’s happily rewarded by her wrapping an arm around his shoulders, Hunter getting the honor of getting to be tucked right at her side under her arm. It makes him feel all fluttery, but this time not in a ‘he’s going to die from lack of oxygen’ way.

In the moment of silence, Gus’ stomach growls, and everyone, including Luz, laughing at it. “Wait, I know where Eda keeps the good snacks in the kitchen, I’ll grab them,” Luz tells them, getting up. Amity gets up, too.

“I’ll go with you,” She adds, the two going to walk away. Gus looks over at Willow, the two staring at each other a second before Gus jumps up.

“Me too!” He exclaims, “I will also go with you.”

Luz beckons for him to follow them, all three of them going down the hall. Hunter looks over at Willow, immediately blushing when he realizes *how* close they are. He doesn’t move back, though, staring entranced at Willow’s huge smile. After a moment she leans her head forward, closing her eyes and resting her forehead on his.

“I’m so happy you’re ok, Hunter,” She tells him, blood rushing up to his ears as they excitedly

twitch.

“Uh, yeah I’m happy you- I’m ok, yeah,” He flusteredly replies, Flapjack chiming in from his hands.

“Hunter red! Hunter red!”

Hunter ignores it, Willow pulling her head back to look down at Flapjack, giggling before looking at Hunter. She doesn’t say anything though, just giving him the warmest, most adorable smile he’s ever seen, so much so that he can’t help but smile back. The others come back a minute later, Hunter looking back forward and feeling Willow rest her head on his shoulder, Hunter unable to stop his ears from twitching a bit *again* . He’s still fuzzy, he tells himself, this is *totally* the potion messing with his head.

“We got snacks!” Gus cheers, walking in with Amity and Luz following behind him, both carrying a couple of bags of various snacks, sitting down back where they were before and beginning to open them up and pass them around. Hunter doesn’t take any, really not hungry after everything that happened today. He’s content just sitting around with all his friends, laughing when Gus shows them how well he can toss Hex Mix pretzels into his mouth. It’s not perfect, not at all, but he’s alive, Flapjack is alive, and his friends are here with him.

Really, that’s all he needs right now.

Unless You Share With Everyone!

Chapter Notes

> i have no idea where on the arm of the titan they are so my bad on the vague description of the owl house location but i have this entire fic planned out so gonna burn through it merry christmas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Are you dressed, kid?" Eda yells into the living room, a beat of silence going by before Hunter sheepishly answers.

"Yeah," He yells back, Eda coming back into the room and chuckling at the sight of Hunter wearing Raine's clothes. He immediately looks embarrassed, looking away and blushing.

"You look fine, kid, it's just funny to see you in Raine's clothes. I'm glad they fit you, though," She comments as she brings him over the blankets she went and got after she sent Luz, Willow, Amity, and Gus up to bed. She sets them down to the right of him, putting the blanket she brought herself down on the armchair, "I'm going to stay down here with you tonight, just to make sure you're ok. We'll move you off the couch at some point but I don't think either of us feel like pushing it tonight."

"I'm ok on the couch, it's alright," He tries to brush her off, but Eda just shakes her head as she pushes the coffee table off into the corner.

"Nope, you're going to sleep in a real room, which one we'll talk about later but you deserve a room to sleep in like everyone else," She firmly counters, glancing back to catch Hunter smiling and Flapjack tweeting at him. She tucks the coffee table out of the way, looking over when she hears bustling coming down the hallway, Willow nervously stepping into the doorway, followed by the other three kids behind her. They're all holding blankets and pillows, now in mixed-matched pajamas from what clothes they have here, Eda immediately knowing what they're about to ask.

"No, you guys can't sleep down here," She shakes her head, all of them frowning.

"Come on, Eda," Luz yawns, "We slept in the same room for two months! You can't pry us apart now."

She sighs, deciding it'll probably make them sleep easier to all be in here. "Alright, come on."

They brighten up, rushing into the room and setting up their bedding on the flood around Hunter. Willow puts her stuff right next to him, lying parallel to the couch. Gus sets up next to her, and going perpendicular but facing the couch are Luz and Amity, Luz laying next to the armchair. Eda smiles when she sees what she's wearing, though, one of Eda's 'Bad Girl Coven' shirts that she *definitely* dug out of Eda's drawer. She doesn't say anything about it but it makes her feel good to know Luz hasn't completely let go of Eda in her life yet. The worry is still there, of course, but this at least pushes it away a bit.

Eda walks over and takes a seat in the armchair, tickling the front of it so their ottoman comes

walking out, giving her a place to put her feet up. Luz must've known that she was going to do that because she lies just far enough not to get trampled by it. Once she's sitting she cuts into the whispered conversations on the ground, "Alright, it's been a long day for everyone, get some sleep, you guys."

They all go quiet for a minute, none of them saying goodnight or anything. Luz breaks the silence, sadly saying, "I wish Vee was here."

"I hope she's doing alright," Willow adds on, "I mean, we left her there, I feel bad."

"She didn't want to come back to the Boiling Isles, she told my mom she'd keep up appearances for her," Luz replies, "I mean, I understand, but I still miss her."

"Yeah, me too," Amity agrees.

"Me three," Gus chimes in.

"We'll see her again soon, hopefully, right?" Willow asks, a tense moment of silence going by before Willow admits, "We probably won't, yeah."

Eda, as much as she wants to cut in, feels how upset they all are and decides to keep quiet, although their conversation just dies down as a few beats of silence go by.

Gus is the first to speak again, quietly going, "Alright, guys, can we go to sleep? I'm kind of tired."

"Yeah, me too," Amity agrees, yawning, "Goodnight everyone."

"Goodnight," Willow says.

"Night guys," Luz adds.

Hunter lays down on the couch, pulling up the blanket and placing Flapjack on the top, looking over at his friends and telling them, "Goodnight guys," He looks back at Flapjack on his chest, whispering to him, "Night, Flap."

Flapjack twitters at him, the room falling silent as they all start falling asleep. Eda gets comfortable in her chair, pulling the blanket over herself and gearing up for a very long night of sitting here, watching Hunter to make sure he doesn't start choking again. She knows she's not going to get any sleep, especially considering that she is not tired at all after the huge day she's had. She watches as Hunter fights sleep for a bit, scratching a sleeping Flapjack on his chest as his eyes start to drift closed over and over. Eventually, though, sleep wins and one hand falls down to his side, the other staying cupped over Flapjack. She knows he actually falls asleep when she hears a funny whistling sound, quietly chuckling when she notices it's coming from the gap in Hunter's teeth. It's kind of adorable, she has to admit.

She loses herself a bit, staring at Hunter in the dimly moonlit room for at least an hour. She snaps right up, though, when she hears one of the kids' breathing speed up, sitting up to see Willow propped up a bit on her hands, looking up at Hunter. She reaches up, seemingly to go to put a hand on Hunter, which Eda *immediately* puts a stop to.

"Willow, stop," She whispers loud enough for Willow to hear, "Don't touch him, you're going to startle him."

"Sorry," She squeaks back, "Sorry, sorry."

“Come here,” Eda beckons her, pulling her legs in and patting the ottoman in front of her. Willow gets up and carefully walks over and sits down in front of Eda. She wipes her eyes, Eda seeing tears running down her cheeks. “What’s up, kid? Bad dream?”

She nods, looking down into her lap and fiddling with her hands. Eda gives her a minute to think, Willow beginning to tearfully explain to her, “In the Human Realm, Hunter, he- he almost drowned and when Camila saved him he was barely breathing and his head was in *my* lap and I thought he was going to die while I was holding him and I- I just- I had a dream where he did, is all.”

“Hey it’s alright, kid, I know it’s tough,” Eda rubs her arm as Willow starts hiccuping, “You’ve been through a *lot* , watching that happen isn’t easy and it’s gonna take some time to get over but he’s right there. Living and breathing, you know he is because his teeth whistle when he sleeps,” She tells her, Willow sitting and listening a minute, hearing the whistle and chuckling.

“Yeah, they do,” She sniffles, “Hunter never slept a lot in the Human Realm, I’ve never heard that.”

“He’s got a *lot* of stuff following him, it would make it hard to sleep for anyone,” She reasons, rubbing Willow’s arm, “But as long of a day as today was, he’s still living and breathing, and so are you. It’s going to be hard, heck, I have dreams of bad things from 20 years ago, but you’ll learn to remember they aren’t real. And I don’t know about other nights, but at least for tonight, if you have a dream like that again you can listen for that whistling to know he’s perfectly alright, ok?”

She nods, looking back down into her lap, “Sorry I tried to touch him.”

“It’s completely alright, and I would’ve let you if I didn’t think he’d get a little startled,” She replies, dropping her hand into her lap, “I don’t know much about Hunter but I do know he scares easily.”

“Yeah, he kind of does,” She affirms, pausing a moment before wiping her eyes and telling Eda, “We shared the same sleeping bag in the Human Realm. We unzipped it and each slept on one side, and a lot of the time we slept back to back. It’s just- weird not sleeping like that.”

“It’s different, I get it, and if he wasn’t so fragile I would’ve let him sleep down on the floor with you but I just don’t want him to get hurt,” She explains, Willow nodding.

“Yeah, I understand, it makes sense. I just think it combined,” She shrugs, “I don’t know.”

“Mhm, that makes sense, and it probably did,” Eda agrees, “Bad memories feed off of anything.”

“Mmm,” Willow hums, looking at Eda almost lost for a moment before her face contorts into a tight frown, about to start crying again.

“Is there something else bothering you, kid?” Eda asks, moving forward a bit so she’s closer to Willow. Willow doesn’t say anything, just looking down into her lap as she starts crying again, this time letting out choked sobs and cupping her mouth as she tries to keep quiet, Eda rubbing her arm and leaning down a bit to look at her. She doesn’t ask again, Willow looking over and brokenly telling Eda, “I don’t know, I don’t know, I miss my family, my dads.”

Eda’s expression falls, knowing she’s completely unable to help with this one. She just opens her arms, letting Willow practically fall into a hug, Eda holding her and rubbing her back as she cries. She whispers to her, “It’ll be ok, kid, you’ll see them again soon. We’ll get them out of there.”

Willow nods but doesn’t say anything, and Eda just continues to hold her. She sees Hunter start to stir, Eda panicking as to what to do to fix it. She’s sure he can hear Willow crying, but she can’t

just tell her to stop. Eda is just worried about Hunter sitting up and throwing Flapjack, who is very fragile right now. However, it seems the little bird has it covered, as he wakes up when his owner whines a bit and rubs up into his hand, and when that doesn't work moves to rubbing against his face and quietly chirping at him, which seems to work pretty well. Eda marvels at it, never having heard of a palisman with *this* close of a connection to someone. Willow looks back when he chirps, too, although she just resumes burying her head into Eda's shoulder.

She cries for another couple of minutes, Eda not saying anything and just continuing to warmingly rub her back. When she pulls away Eda smiles at her, rubbing her arm. She waits for Willow to say something first, Willow shamefully whispering to her, "Sorry for bothering you."

"No, you're not bothering me, not at all. I'm a pro at taking in stray kids, I have a track record with it. And if all you're doing is crying you're *way* easier than King, he animated his stuffed animals once and tore up the house," She jokes, really not wanting to bring up King but knowing it's going to calm Willow down. Willow laughs, though, which brings at least a little lightness to the topic. It still brings King up to the forefront of Eda's mind, though, which she despises.

"Yeah, I guess, but we did make your house walk once," Willow wipes her eyes and sniffles.

"Eh, honestly I'm surprised that hadn't happened earlier," She shrugs, "It happens."

Willow looks at her questioningly, Eda just laughing.

"Hey, with Hooty around anything goes," She tells her, Willow nodding and going quiet a second before smiling at Eda.

"Thank you for talking to me," She says, Eda smiling back.

"Of course, kid, I'm always here to chat," She assures her, "It's been a long day, though, are you ready to get back to bed?"

"Yeah, I think so," She nods, yawning, "Sorry I woke you up."

"Oh, you didn't wake me up, I was up already," Eda tells her, Willow looking at her suspiciously but just nodding

"Ok, goodnight Eda," She says, getting up.

"Night, kid," Eda smiles back, watching as Willow goes over to where her stuff is, laying back down and pulling the blanket up over herself. Hunter opens his eyes and looks down at her, the two of them whispering to each other a minute before they both go back to bed, Hunter dropping one of his arms so it dangles off the couch and Willow moving over to sleep right next to it, linking her fingers with hers with her palm facing down and his facing out. It's a weird way of holding hands, Eda muses, but if it brings them both comfort she's not going to dock it. They both fall asleep pretty fast, too, Hunter's telltale whistling letting Eda know that the two of them are safe and sound. There is *definitely* something going on between them, though, and Eda is a little mad she didn't get it out of Willow tonight. Although, it definitely wasn't the time to ask.

Time just ticks by as Eda watches all the kids sleep, keeping her eyes mainly trained on Hunter. She gets a little drowsy but not much, not really too keen to be falling asleep upright. Also, the thought that the moment she falls asleep could be the moment something goes wrong scares her, and she's hoping that if that happens her being awake will stop the kids from freaking out and never sleeping again because she's sure they're pretty close to that. That combined with the now constant thoughts of King really don't let her even think about closing her eyes. She can handle *one*

night of no sleep, no big deal.

It's not long before the sun comes shining in the window, Eda feeling a sense of relief that all of them made it through the night ok. She *is* surprised, though, when Hunter wakes up almost immediately upon the sun rising, eyes drifting open as he greets Flapjack cuddled against his face and sits up, moving Flapjack into his hands.

"Good morning, kid," Eda greets him, patting the ottoman so it goes back into the spot under the chair and her feet can touch the ground, "You're up early."

He looks at her confused, "What time is it?"

Eda looks over at the clock on the wall, "It's like 6 in the morning."

"That's when I wake up," He hesitantly answers, clearly really confused, "The sun is up,"

"Hey, whatever floats your boat," She shrugs, getting up out of the chair and stretching, "Are you going back to sleep?"

"No, the sun is up," He repeats, Eda just sighing and smiling at how set in his Emperor's Coven ways he is.

"Alright, alright," She concedes, "How are you feeling?"

"Better than yesterday," He tells her, Eda nodding.

"Mhm, good, that's good. I'm going to go make breakfast, are you alright in here?" She asks, Hunter nodding. "Yell if you need me, or send Flapjack, either one."

"Mhm," He nods, Eda walking out of the room and going into the kitchen. She takes out things for breakfast, breaking into her stash of griffin eggs she's had waiting for when Luz gets back. Normally she tells everyone to fend for themselves, and only maybe makes something for her and Raine to eat. But these kids probably haven't had a real meal for a while, so she figures she can cook for them at least, as tired as she's starting to feel being up on her feet.

Although she tries to be quiet, she hears someone come down the stairs anyway, looking up to see Raine in the doorway. They smile, "Good morning."

"Hey," Eda greets, going back to what she's doing. She doesn't miss Raine's concerned look as they walk up to her, though.

"Eda, you look exhausted," They comment, leaning against the corner of the counter where Eda is setting things out, "Did you sleep at all last night?"

She shrugs, although the answer is a pretty clean-cut no.

"That's not *healthy* ," They chide.

"Well someone had to watch the kid, and no one else was jumping to do it," She clips back, Raine sighing.

"He was ok-"

"But what if he wasn't," She steps back from the counter, "What if he stopped breathing in the middle of the night and the kids had to deal with that on their own? They'd never sleep again, Raine, I had to be there to make sure he was ok. One night of sleep means nothing to me, I've lost

way more than that before."

"But you didn't get up in the morning and cook breakfast," They counter, walking over to her, "I'll cook, *you* go upstairs and get at least a couple hours of sleep in."

"But-"

"Please," They emphasize, "Just let me do it."

Eda sighs but relents, "Alright, ok, fine."

Raine smiles back at her, giving her a hug but not saying anything. Eda buries her face in Raine's shoulder, admittedly being at a little bit of an awkward angle considering how much shorter than her they are, but she does it anyway. They stand there and hold her, Eda, in admittedly a big moment of weakness, murmuring to them, "Can you come up to bed with me?"

"Yeah, I can, we can make breakfast later," They tell her, stepping back and looking up at her, "I'll put everything away, you go lay down."

Eda nods, going to go upstairs and into her room but stopping on the first step when she remembers she told Hunter she'd be in the other room. She goes back into the living room and pokes her head in, seeing Willow sitting on the couch next to Hunter, the two of them quietly chatting. They both look up when Eda pokes her head in.

"Good morning, Willow," Eda greets, "I was just going to tell you I was going upstairs, Hunter, but it seems like you got someone looking out for you down here."

"Yeah, we're ok, Eda," Willow smiles, "I'll keep him in check."

"Not what I'm worried about but that works too I guess," She mumbles to herself, replying to Willow, "Just come upstairs and knock on my door if you need anything, ok?"

"Mhm, thank you," Willow answers, Hunter just smiling at her. Well, it's not *really* a smile, but it's close enough to one. Eda just smiles and pats the wall before going back off upstairs, into her room down the hall. Instead of the nest, which she really hasn't felt a need to use since she's made peace with the Owl Beast so it stays pushed off into the far corner of the room, Eda walks over and lays down in her bed, which the Construction Coven Head built for her recently. The comfort of it is *so* nice, Eda not having laid down in *way* too long. Raine comes up only a couple of minutes later, smiling at her when they walk in and take off their glasses, putting them on the bedside table and climbing in with her under the covers. Eda wraps herself around Raine, tucking her head right under their chin, Eda feeling Raine move her hair a bit so it's not all in their face.

"Thanks," Eda mumbles, Raine running their hands through her hair, which is admittedly a little unruly.

"Of course," They reply, "And I locked the door too, just in case."

"You're the best, Rainestorm," She tells them, moving back to see them looking at her, sheepishly smiling. She leans forward and rests her forehead on theirs, closing her eyes as she listens to their quiet, cheeky reply.

"I know I am."

***

Hunter pokes at the plate in front of him, not really having an appetite for anything right now. He can hear everyone else in the kitchen laughing and talking to each other, kind of regretting telling Eda and his friends that he was fine in here on his own. She offered to move him, and all his friends offered to have breakfast in the living room with him, but he said no to both. He already is causing so many disturbances for them, and the last thing he wants is to cause more. He's been visited a couple of times, once by Darius to check up on him under the ruse that he just wanted to know if his trip was worth it, and once by Raine who just popped their head in to say hello. Flapjack, though, who has unfortunately stayed with him, is not happy with his choice to eat alone and has been annoyingly twittering about it for ten minutes.

"Hunter sad, Hunter friends, Flapjack get friends," Flapjack repeats for the tenth time, *"Flapjack ground."*

"No, stay here, I'm fine," He dismisses him, Flapjack pecking at his arm, "Ow! Flap you need to stop doing that. That hurts."

"Hunter listen, Flapjack stop," Flapjack argues with him, *"Flapjack ground."*

Hunter sighs, knowing he's not going to win this fight and setting Flapjack down on the ground to go hop away down the hall. "Don't get kicked!" Hunter yells at him, Flapjack wordlessly chirping back at him as he disappears around the corner. Hunter goes back to poking at his plate.

A minute later he looks up to see Willow in the doorway of the room, holding her plate in one hand and Flapjack in the other. Hunter has never seen a bird with such a look of pride on his face before.

"Hey, Flapjack came and got me, are you ok?" She asks, walking in and sitting down next to him, setting her plate down on the coffee table and holding Flapjack in her lap, "You look lonely in here."

"It's ok," He dismisses her, "It's ok, really, I'm fine in here by myself, you don't have to eat in here with me."

"I didn't believe you the first time, either, and I don't believe you now," She smiles back at him, "Flapjack wouldn't come to get me if you were ok."

"He's wrong, I'm fine," He looks back down at his plate, Willow moving a bit closer.

"Are you sure you're ok?" She asks again, Hunter just nodding. Flapjack hops off her hands and over to sit on top of her leg, looking up at him a second before pecking at Hunter.

"Flapjack!" Hunter exclaims, "No, don't do that, no more."

Flapjack just keeps pecking at him, Hunter putting down his plate and picking up the bird, holding him up to eye level with Hunter.

"Flapjack, you need to stop it with the pecking," He tells him, Flapjack firmly chirping back.

"Hunter wrong," He argues, *"Hunter tell pretty girl!"*

"Hunter *nothing* ," Hunter counters, Flapjack leaning forward and pecking at Hunter's nose. Hunter pulls him away from his face, "Flapjack!"

Willow laughs beside him, Hunter looking over to see her smiling at him, her cheeks a bit red. He doesn't think anything of it, though. "Why has he started pecking at you?" She asks, "I swear he wasn't doing that two days ago."

"He can't pull at my hair anymore because he can't fly, so now he *pecks at me* ," Hunter glares at the bird in his hands, who looks away dramatically. "He's a bit of a brat sometimes."

"Flapjack help!" Flapjack tells him, *"Flapjack to pretty girl, no Hunter."*

"You're so ridiculous, buddy," He shakes his head, looking over at Willow and holding out Flapjack, "He wants you to hold him. He's mad I called him a brat."

Willow takes Flapjack, scratching his head and telling him, "I would never call you a brat, Flapjack."

"Flapjack like pretty girl," Flapjack happily chirps, Hunter rolling his eyes. They sit in silence for a minute before Willow brings back up the topic Hunter was hoping she forgot about.

"But, Hunter, are you ok?" She repeats, "You didn't answer me earlier."

"Oh, uh, yeah, yeah I'm fine," He tries to lie, glancing into his lap, although he looks up at Willow to see she's not buying it at all. She's staring at him knowingly. "Ok, ok, no I'm not."

"What's going on? Is something bothering you?" She questions, Hunter shrugging.

"I don't know, just yesterday," He looks into his lap, fiddling with his hands, "It's just a lot to think about."

"Mhm, yeah, but anything about it?" She asks, Hunter staying hauntingly quiet. Willow looks at him suspiciously, "Is it what I'm thinking about?"

"Yeah," He shamefully nods, knowing she's referencing him being a Grimwalker, "Yeah, it's that."

"What about it? I'm listening," She assures him, Hunter just staring at his hands and thinking about everything he said to Flapjack yesterday. He's not sure how much of it he's willing to share, but when he looks up at Willow to see her warmly smiling at him he decides he wants to tell her *all* of it.

"I mean, I don't know, I just didn't want you guys to know that about me yet. Luz knew, she found out in the Belos' mind like I did and so I obviously couldn't hide it from her but I just didn't want everyone to know that I'm not even really a person and I'm just a copy of the same person Belos has tried to reclaim for years-" He abruptly stops himself when he realizes he rambled too far into his thought process, Willow looking at him confused. "You don't know who I'm modeled after, do you?" He slowly asks.

Willow shakes her head, "No, I have no idea."

Hunter sighs, contemplating the merits of *not* telling Willow the full truth but feeling like a *little* more off of his chest won't hurt. Something about Willow seems to do that to him, and he takes a deep breath before telling her, "Caleb, Belos' brother."

"Ohhh," She realizes, "You know what? That makes a *lot* of sense. I thought the statue in Gravesfield looked familiar."

Hunter lets out a small, weak laugh, nodding, “Yeah, I look like him. The most like him, actually, according to Belos. I’m not- me, I’m someone else and it just- it doesn’t feel good.”

Willow looks at him sadly, “I’m sorry, Hunter.”

Hunter shrugs, looking down when he feels like he’s getting too worked up about it. “It’s ok,” He mumbles, his voice wavering a bit, “It’s just who I am, I guess.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” She counters, Hunter looking up at her confused. “I think that’s got nothing to do with who you are.”

“What do you mean by that?” He tilts his head questioningly, “It’s got *everything* to do with who I am.”

“No, it’s got everything to do with how you were *made* , which has no forced impact on who you are, it only impacts it if you choose for it to,” She tells him, Willow pausing a second before asking him, “You know I have two dads, right? Have you ever seen them?”

Hunter shakes his head, “No, when would I have?”

“Good point,” She laughs, opening her hands and her scroll appearing, a weird sight after none of them being able to use them in the Human Realm for two months. She grabs it and taps on it for a minute before handing it to him, Hunter seeing a picture of Willow standing between two older men. One of them looks just like her, with glasses, slick black hair, and pale skin. The other doesn’t look anything like her, with a big burly brown beard and almost no hair, and much darker skin than Willow’s. He puzzles at it for a moment before looking back up and handing back her scroll, which she vanishes before continuing.

“I mean, so, like you saw, I don’t look like both of them. I look a lot like my dad, the one that looks like me, but nothing like my papa. Well, that’s because my dads had a surrogate, a woman who agreed to give birth to me so that my dads could have a kid. I don’t know anything about her, I don’t even know her name, all I know is that biologically I’m her daughter. Logically, that makes her my mother, but I don’t think of her like that. She’s how I was made, yeah, but she’s got *nothing* to do with the kind of person I am,” Willow explains, “My dads made me very comfortable with it when I was younger, but even then it still makes me feel weird sometimes, thinking about how I’m technically related to some woman out there I don’t know. I don’t consider it a part of me, though, because the person *I* am has two dads that are my real parents, and that’s that. It’s not nearly as severe but the same applies to you, Hunter, you might come from someone you didn’t know but that doesn’t mean you have anything to do with him. You’re just Hunter! Not Caleb or anything like that, you’re Hunter. And I like that about you a whole lot.”

Hunter immediately, very violently blushes, looking down into his lap and smiling. “Uh, thanks, yeah, thank you,” He stammers, collecting himself before looking back up and responding, “I, uh, never knew that about you.”

“Yeah, not a lot of people do,” She shrugs, “I don’t necessarily keep it a secret but it’s not something that I go around sharing a lot.”

“Yeah, that- that makes a lot of sense,” He nods, sitting up and looking at her wide-eyed when he realizes how bad that sounded, “Not- Not that you’re uh- not that you’re- you’re that, that’s not bad and I don’t think it’s a bad thing you shouldn’t share it’s just that like- like I- I get that things are hard to talk about like- like that.”

Willow just laughs, “It’s ok, I know what you mean. And you’re right, it is hard to talk about, and

it's hard to talk about for you too. Which is why I appreciate you telling me! Thank you, I'm glad I know about it now, and it's kind of like we have something in common, in a weird, not-similar-at-all way."

"I think it's pretty similar," He tells her, "I mean, you're from someone you don't know, *I'm* from someone *I* don't know, those are similar."

"Yeah, I guess when you put it like that they are," She nods, "Similar or not, though, my point stands that you're whoever you make yourself to be, not what made you. And that it's ok to be upset too, and that if you ever feel like that I'm here to talk about it. Maybe I won't always fully understand but I will always listen, I promise you."

Hunter smiles at her, looking down into his lap again as he tries to pluck up the courage to ask for a hug and fails, instead just looking up and saying, "Thanks, Willow, I'll keep it in mind."

She sets Flapjack down on the table and just opens her arms, Hunter wrapping himself around her. She squeezes him a little bit, definitely going softer on him than she normally does. Hunter *loves* to be squeezed really hard, any kind of pressure just calms him right down, so he's a little disappointed she doesn't hug as hard as he knows she can. It's probably for his health, though, considering a *lot* happened to him yesterday that he still is recovering from.

He only gets to linger there for a minute before Eda pokes her head around the corner into the living room, Hunter quickly sitting back. Willow looks at him confused but when she looks back at Eda she smiles.

"Oh, hi Eda!" She greets.

"Hey, I was just checking on you two," She says, pointing at the plate in front of Hunter, "Kid, you need to eat *something* ."

"Sorry ma'am," He shrinks away a bit, an overwhelming feeling of guilt settling in his chest that he didn't eat the breakfast she spent time making for him.

"Woah, no ma'am, I'm a criminal and not even 50 yet, definitely not warranting of*that* title," She stops him, "Eda, call me Eda."

"Sorry, sorry uh, sorry Eda," He sputters out, Eda just chuckling.

"Calm down, kid, it's fine, I'm not being serious," She assures him, "Well, I am being serious about calling me Eda, but I'm not being serious about being mad about it. I don't care, it doesn't bother me."

Hunter nods in understanding, oddly warmed by how well she explained that.

"Do you need anything though?" Eda asks, Hunter shaking his head, "Alright, let me go back to dishes then, yell if you need me."

"Thank you," He answers, Eda going back down the hallway. Hunter looks back at Willow, unable to keep himself from smiling at her. She laughs, waving at him with her free hand.

"Hi!" She greets, Hunter blushing. She just giggles again before pointing at his plate on the table, "Eda is right, you should eat more."

"I mean, I'm not really hungry," He shrugs, both of them looking over when two people walk into the room, seeing Amity and Gus appearing in the doorway. Hunter brightly smiles, happy to see

his friends have come to see him. Gus just comes running into the room, happily cheering.

“Guess who is here to spend some precious time with you!”

***

Luz looks over from where she’s helping Eda wash dishes as Gus and Willow walk out of the room, Eda setting a plate back in the cabinet as she starts talking first.

“So, kid, it’s been a while, how have things been? How was being back in the Human Realm?” Eda asks, generally lightheartedly. Luz just shrugs, though.

“They were fine,” She dismissively replies, really not in the mood to talk about everything that happened. She *also* isn’t in the mood to talk to Eda, but she agreed to help her with the dishes, so she doesn’t really have a choice.

“Fine, that’s all you got?” She jokingly quips back, looking over at her, “More had to have happened than just that things were fine.”

Luz just shrugs again, not saying anything this time. Eda stops what she’s doing, reaching over and turning off the sink Luz is using to wash dishes. Luz looks at her confused, plate still in her hands.

“The dishes can wait, come on, kid,” She beckons, Luz hesitantly putting down the plate she’s holding and drying her hands off on the towel hanging beside the sink, following as Eda walks her up the stairs into Eda’s room, Luz squinting confused at the new addition of an actual bed in Eda’s room. There’s a bedside table on each side of the bed, Luz noticing that on one of the sides is a *very* familiar earring that she knows definitely isn’t Eda’s. Eda just ushers her further into the room, though, shutting the door and ushering the two of them over to the big window. Eda pushes it open, sitting down and patting the spot next to her, Luz taking a hesitant seat next to Eda. She finds herself smiling as she looks out at the very familiar sight of the vast woods around the Owl House and the distant view of the bones of the Titan. It’s oddly really heartwarming, even the smell of the boiling sea next to them is calming to Luz right now.

After Eda gives her a moment to take it all in, she lightly nudges Luz, saying, “Is it how you remember?”

Luz looks up at her before, nodding, looking back out at the Boiling Isles, “Yeah, it is. Smells the same too.”

Eda chuckles, “Haven’t grown too used to the water not boiling?”

“No, no, although it *was* nice to be able to go out in the rain again,” She tells her, looking up to see Eda smiling at her fondly. Luz can’t find it in herself to enjoy the moment, though, just sighing and looking back out at the view from the window. She sees Eda’s face fall a bit out of the corner of her eye.

“What’s up with you, kid? You’ve been awfully quiet since you got back,” She points out, “Something bothering you?”

Luz shrugs, the sad story of the last two months on the tip of her tongue. She can’t find it in herself to tell Eda, though, something in her, whether it be guilt or self-preservation, doesn’t want Eda to

know how bad things have gotten for her recently. Eda just wraps an arm around her shoulders, though, rubbing her shoulder.

“You know, kid, I missed you a lot when you were gone,” Eda looks out at the forest as she continues, “I searched relentlessly for two weeks to try to find you. I found just about everything else, I found Alador, my parents, Kikimora, *everything* but you. It’s funny, because I didn’t come across Kikimora at the Head until my fifth visit there, and *she* was the one that ended up helping me realize where you were. She told me she saw you fight Belos in his big scary goop form and then run off into the portal room in the Head, and when I walked in there and found this,” She reaches into her hair with her free arm and pulls out a small piece of jagged golden metal, Luz snatching it out of her hand.

“King’s friendship bracelet!” She exclaims, staring in shock up at Eda, “I- I thought I lost it forever, how did you find it?”

“Harpy Eda *loves* shiny things,” She tells her, Luz laughing as she looks down at the piece in her hand. Eda shakes her a bit, continuing her story, “Well, I saw that stupid thing and knew you were nowhere here because you would *never* leave that thing somewhere if you could avoid it. And, it being right outside the broken portal, I pretty safely assumed that you were in the Human Realm. And, well I was right, not to give myself too much credit. I found something else, too, when I was scouting around,” She says, getting up and going back into her room, rustling in the chest in her room before pulling out something, turning back to Luz and holding up King’s red collar with his engraved yellow tag.

“The collar,” She marvels, “Where was it?”

“In the huge pit under the bridge to that portal room,” She answers as she puts back the collar, walking over to resume her spot next to Luz, putting her arm back around her shoulders. “But by the time I found it I knew King was with the Collector, back then we were seeing him pretty constantly on the crystal balls that Orsan was watching. We haven’t seen him recently, though, 23 days since we saw him to be exact.”

Luz deflates a little, an all too familiar guilty feeling settling in her chest. Although she knows the answer, she still brokenly asks, “Do you know if he’s ok?”

Eda sighs, “I’m sorry, kid, I wish I could tell you. All we can do is hope.”

Luz puts the piece of metal back in her pajama pants pocket, leaning against Eda. She doesn’t have anything to say, and the thought of King being hurt makes her feel sick to her stomach. She doesn’t have to say anything, luckily, as Eda fills in the silence for her.

“We’re doing everything we can to figure out everything we can about what the Collector is doing. We don’t know much yet, just some of the information about what kind of spell he’s using and the basic idea of how to get people out of it, but nothing much,” Eda tells her, “The Collector is one big mystery to us, all we know is what I got out of Kikimora, which is just that King freed the Collector and the Collector took him, talking about some game. So, from there, we figured out that the Collector has everyone mind controlled because they're some psychotic child looking to play a game. We’re not super sure of his motives or how to get to him, we’re trying to lay low so *we* don’t get sucked into the spell, but things around here have just been slow. No progress, no steps forward, nothing. And without you around stuff here was *boring* . All I had around was my parents and the Coven Heads.”

“And *Raine* ,” Luz teasingly draws out their name, Eda groaning and rolling her eyes, Luz laughing and brightening up at the new, much less serious and more familiar topic. She’s talked about Raine

with Eda a lot, and it's something that always cheers her up and calms her down.

"Ok, yes, and Raine, but they're also a Coven Head so I covered them already," Eda argues, Luz elbowing her.

"Come on, they aren't just a Coven Head to you, if they were, their *earring* wouldn't be on your bedside table of your new *normal bed* ," Luz points out, Eda looking away and covering her face.

"Kid, when did you get so observant?" She questions, looking back for Luz to see a slight blush on her cheeks, Luz perking up.

"Have you *finally* gotten back together?" She asks, Eda shaking her head.

"No, no, no, way too fast, we're just friends," Eda stops her.

"Friends who sleep in the same bed?" Luz deadpans, looking up at Eda and smiling.

"Yes, Luz, friends who sleep in the same bed," She affirms, "It's just in a normal, completely platonic way. The Owl House doesn't have infinite space."

"Yeah, ok, great excuse," Luz clips back, looking back out the window before excitedly back at Eda, "But are you *going* to date?"

Eda laughs, "Titan, you want to know the truth?"

"More than *anything* ."

"You can't tell anyone, but we're on our way to getting back together, in my opinion," Eda quietly tells her, "You know, it's been 20-something years, but we still get along just like we used to. So, if you want my take on it, yes, but don't hold your breath waiting for it because there is still a *lot* the two of us need to work out before then."

"Mm, I'm satisfied by that answer," Luz playfully crosses her arms, Eda ruffling her hair.

"Now, enough about me and Raine, *you* need to tell me about what's going on between Willow and Hunter," She says, "Because I know something is there, I can see it."

"Oh, Willow has a *huge* crush on Hunter," Luz gossips, "And I'm pretty sure Hunter likes her back, although I'm not completely confident that he's realized that yet. They are so touchy all the time, sit right next to each other at breakfast, Willow holds his hand and guides him around places, they *hug* . Hunter lets her hug him all *the time* , it's ridiculous! Hunter has hugged me maybe all of three times, and it was only when he was upset. I think it's unfair because I introduced hugging to everyone so *I* should be the person getting all the hugs, not Willow. But, good for them, yadda yadda, she makes him really happy and it's nice to see him actually relax for once, all that. But no, nothing is technically going on between them, they're just friends."

"I see, classic 'mutual pining' scenario," She nods, pausing before looking at Luz and asking, "Did I use that right?"

Luz laughs, "Yeah, you did."

"See, I remember things, I'm not that old," She jokes back, the two laughing but falling silent after that, Luz going back to looking out at the forest in front of her. The painful thought worms into her mind, how there's no familiar weight on her lap as they sit here like there normally is. No soft snoring or complaining of the sun being too bright or Luz moving too much. No *King* . Luz moves

even closer to Eda, Eda looking down at her and furrowing her brow. “What’s up, kid? Something wrong?”

Luz shrugs, painfully aware of the lump in her through and just barely choking out, “I miss King.”

Eda’s expression saddens, turning to pull Luz into a hug. The feeling immediately breaks her, Luz clinging to Eda as she starts crying. Eda slowly rubs her back, and although reassuring, Luz can hear the tears in Eda’s voice when she speaks again.

“It’ll be ok, kid, we’ll get him out of there.” There’s a pause before Eda speaks again, very quietly and unsure this time.

“Somehow.”

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Hunter grumbles at the strange, human, turning colored cube Eda gave him, telling him that he’s not allowed to work his brain any more than to do this puzzle. He thinks it’s stupid because this puzzle is *really* hard, but at least it’s keeping him occupied. Willow has her head perched on his shoulder, watching him as he tries to get all the sides one color. Gus is on the armchair, casting various illusions of a miniature Flyer Derby game on the table, while Luz and Amity are curled up on the loveseat, both sharing one of Luz’s Azura books that Hunter is pretty sure she’s read twenty times over.

“Turn that one there,” Willow points at the left column, “Maybe?”

Hunter turns a couple of columns and rows, although he just ends up further than he was before. “No, because now look, this white is over here.”

“Wait, undo what you did,” She tells him, Hunter turning around the cube in his hands before shaking his head.

“I have no idea what I just did,” He looks over at her, although he can’t do that too well with where her head is perched, “I-”

He’s cut off by the front door flinging open, everyone in the room perking up. No one gets a chance to get up, though, when they see a long head of slick, black hair come into the room, followed by two huge bat wings pulling it inside. Hunter stares agape as the huge bat-looking thing with a face squeezes through the door.

“Luz the human, I have come for my visit,” The bat announces, Luz’s eyes widening.

“Oh, oh yeah, Bat Queen! Hi,” She nervously laughs, “I’m just uh, I’m just gonna, uh, get Eda, to say hello! Yeah, I’ll just,” She gets up, nervously side-stepping towards the door to the living room before going off down the hallway, the Bat Queen just laughing.

“Ah, good to see Luz the human has not changed,” She redirects her focus over to Hunter, looking around him before her eyes settle on where Flapjack is sleeping in his lap. “Flapjack,” She calls, Flapjack stirring awake before he begins violently chirping.

“Bat mama! Bat mama! Hunter bat mama!” Flapjack looks up at him, Hunter putting down the

cube he's holding and picking up Flapjack, looking at him confused. He doesn't get to ask anything, though, because the Bat Queen speaks first.

"Flapjack, it is so good to see you are doing alright," She says, walking up closer and holding out her talon, "Can I see him, young one?"

"Uhhh," He stares up at her in shock, still trying to process that the *Bat Queen* is standing in front of him. He's still not completely sure that it's not the potion they have him on doing this to him, the sound of Eda's voice breaking him of his shocked trance.

"BQ, have you ever heard of knocking?" Eda questions, the Bat Queen looking over at her.

"Luz the human was supposed to tell you that I was to visit," She tells her, Luz nervously rubbing the back of her neck when Eda looks over at her.

Eda just ruffles Luz's hair, though, "Eh, a surprise is good for us, gets the heart working. Well, maybe not good for that one," She points to Hunter, who is *still* processing what's going on. "I think you scared him."

The Bat Queen looks back at Hunter, who jumps to try to cover up that he was staring agape at her, "Uh, I'm- I-"

"It's alright, young one, I should have introduced myself first," She assures him, "I am the Bat Queen. Before he found you, I look after Flapjack for a very long time."

"Oh, uh, thank you?" Hunter awkwardly answers, "Oh, I'm- I'm Hunter."

"It is nice to meet you, Hunter," She smiles at him, an oddly warm expression for the intimidating presence of the Bat Queen.

"You- You too," He stammers back, the Bat Queen holding out her talon again.

"Now, Hunter, can I see Flapjack? I just want to speak to him," She tells him, Hunter putting Flapjack in his hands and shakily standing up, holding his hands out so Flapjack can jump from them to the Bat Queen's wing. He sits back down on the couch afterward, admittedly a little hard with his weakened muscles. His eyes are trained on the Bat Queen as she pulls Flapjack closer to her face, although Flapjack is tweeting at her happily. Her eyes glow yellow, Hunter looking at her with concern when she starts talking, "Oh, I see. They did? Well, I am glad that you are ok, Flapjack. And Hunter too, yes."

Her eyes go back to normal, Flapjack looking back at Hunter and tweeting to him, *"Hunter, bat mama!"*

"I see, yeah, I see buddy," He affirms, the Bat Queen chuckling, looking up at Hunter.

"Flapjack is very bonded to you, I am very impressed," She tells him, "Palismen take a long time to deeply connect with their witch, but yours has happened fast."

"Flapjack love Hunter!" Flapjack cuts into her speech, Hunter unable to keep himself from smiling, *"Hunter take care Flapjack, Hunter love Flapjack."*

The Bat Queen looks at Flapjack in surprise, marveling, "You love him?"

Flapjack nods, *"Hunter right."*

“I see, he is very right for you. You have made a good choice, Flapjack,” She tells him, looking back at Hunter, “And I was wary at first of someone young with Flapjack, but you have earned my trust. He is no regular palisman, he is very special.”

“Flapjack special,” Flapjack smartly tweets back at Hunter.

“Definitely special, buddy,” Hunter answers, “That’s a word to describe you.”

Hunter immediately tenses up when the Bat Queen’s face flashes with anger, but Flapjack speaks before she can. *“No, bat mama. Hunter funny, Hunter and Flapjack funny,”* He assures her, *“No mean.”*

“Hm,” She hums, her face relaxing, “You jump to defend him so quick, I did not know you had gotten so close so quickly.”

“Flapjack know Hunter,” Flapjack replies, *“Flapjack know… Hunter like pretty girl!”*

“Flap,” Hunter groans, feeling his face go red, “Why are you sharing my secrets?”

The Bat Queen just laughs, asking, “Who is this?”

Flapjack turns around and tweets towards Willow, *“Pretty girl, flower girl, with Hunter.”*

“Mmm, I see,” Bat Queen smiles, “Well, I will let you go back to him, I trust in him to keep you safe.”

She holds her talon out, Hunter shakily pushing himself up to grab Flapjack from her, cupping him in his hands as he flops back down on the couch. Flapjack happily chirps, *“Hunter meet bat mama.”*

“Mhm, I did,” Hunter nods, scratching Flapjack’s head and looking up as he sees Bat Queen turn to Eda.

“Have you been safe here, at Owl House?” She questions, Eda nodding.

“Yeah, we’re pretty hidden away here, nothing has come to us yet,” She answers, “Why? Has something happened to you? The Collector isn’t giving you trouble, is he?”

“No, no Collector, Belos. He tried to attack my palisman, times are dangerous. I do not know where he has gone, I am worried about my forests.”

“That’s not good at all, that means he’s trying to get powerful again,” Luz comments, looking up at Eda. Eda just rubs her shoulder, though.

“We’ll figure it out,” She assures Luz, looking up at the Bat Queen, “Is there anything we can do to help? Anyone we can send to watch them or anything?”

“Not right now, but if Belos comes back maybe palismen might be safer in a new part of the forest. Then I may ask for some help,” She tells Eda, who nods.

“Mhm, we’ll be happy to provide it,” Eda smiles, “We’re in this together, and we’ll figure it out together.”

“Thank you, Eda the Owl Lady,” She responds, “I cannot leave palismen for long, I need to go back to my forest. I will see you again soon, yes?”

“Of course, stop by anytime you need us, the door is always open for you to barge in through,” Eda jokes, the Bat Queen just chuckling and looking back at Hunter.

“I will see you again soon, Flapjack, and you too, Hunter,” She bids them goodbye, heading towards the door and turning back to look at Luz, “Oh, and Luz the human, I am happy you are ok, too.”

“Oh, thanks, thanks Bat Queen,” Luz smiles, the Bat Queen leaving out the front door and shutting it behind her. In the moment of silence after she leaves, Hunter hears Mrs. Noceda’s shocked voice in the hallway.

“ *Who* was that?” She questions, everyone looking over in surprise that she was back there the whole time.

“Oh, that was the Bat Queen I told you about,” Luz tells her.

Mrs. Noceda walks up on the other side of Luz from Eda, leaning over and giving her a kiss on the head, telling her, “I should have never doubted you about all of that stuff you thought up, mija, because it is really catching up to me.”

Luz laughs, “Hey, I told you so.”

Camila chuckles, Hunter catching how Eda’s face falls when she sees it. She walks off almost immediately, going back down the hallway somewhere else. Luz keeps talking to her mom about Boiling Isles things she has yet to see, the two of them leaving too. Hunter shakes off the weird feeling he got from the scene and just picks back up his weird human cube, Willow propping her head back on his shoulder. He turns it around in his hands a bit, looking over when Willow asks him.

“What was Flapjack talking about earlier? With the Bat Queen when she looked over here?”

Hunter’s eyes widen, desperately trying to scrounge up a lie, “Uh, just, just something stupid, it was nothing. Just about- about uh-”

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me, it’s ok,” She assures him, “I was just wondering.”

“Oh, yeah, I don’t,” He realizes, letting out a sigh of relief, “It was just nothing.”

Willow puts her arm closest to him behind his neck, hand hanging off his shoulder as she goes back to looking down at the cube he’s holding. He looks back at it, too, but he doesn’t think about it at all. His head is swirling with everything that just happened to him, but primarily how shocked the Bat Queen was that he and Flapjack were so close. He thought it was a little odd, yes, but if the keeper of all lost palismen thinks it’s weird it *really* must be odd. He’s sure it’s got something to do with his least favorite part of himself, being a Grimwalker, but he’s going to choose to believe it’s not because of that, and it’s just because Flapjack loves him a lot.

And if he asked him, he’s pretty sure that would be the right answer.

Chapter End Notes

no raine and eda didn't BANG cough cough my girlfriend

also i do not support that boiling isles mpreg truthers surrogate baby willow ftw!!!!!!!!!!!! fantastic dads don't have to have given birth to her to love her and be amazing parents!!!!!!!!

The Interpretive Art of Loneliness

Chapter Notes

> i swear this book isn't luz bashing i love her so much and she deserves a strong exploration of her unique story and struggle

Eda looks over as Willow, Gus, and Amity leave the kitchen, leaving just Eda and Luz's mom in the room, who walks over to where Eda has started to clean the dishes from breakfast this morning, the second morning that Eda has made breakfast for all of them.

"Do you want some help?" She offers, Eda looking over.

"Oh, no, I'm ok," Eda tries to deny, although Luz's mom just picks up a clean plate and starts putting it away, Eda impressed she knows where the plates go.

"So, I didn't get a chance to talk to you yesterday, but I never really got to introduce myself," Luz's mom starts, "I don't remember if I ever told you my name. I probably did but anyway, I'm Camila. I've heard so much about you, it's great to finally meet you."

"Yeah, you too," She nods, handing her another plate, "I've heard quite a bit about you too."

Camila chuckles, "Probably not super good things, I'm guessing."

Eda looks at her confused, "No, great things, actually. Luz talked about you all the time, she wanted to go back and see you almost the whole time she was here."

"Really?" She looks over in surprise, "I would've thought that Luz would've talked all about how much she was mad at me for sending her to camp."

"Eh, I got a little of that, but she got over it quickly. She made videos for you all the time, telling you all the stuff she was doing," Eda tells her, "It varied, I guess."

"I guess Luz is like that, yeah," She nods, looking down the hallway when the kids laugh in the other room, "She's being like that right now, actually, hiding in her room."

"Is she awake?" Eda asks, "I knocked but only Amity came out, I figured she wasn't awake yet."

"No, she's up, I went in there, but she didn't want to talk to me today. Amity looked sad, too, before she came down, it's just one of those days for Luz," Camila sighs, "Was she like this with you?"

Eda shakes her head, "No, never, I've never known her as anything but happy. Well, maybe at the end she was a little bummed, but I think we all were. You know, Day of Unity and all of that- Wait, do you know?"

"I know what Luz told me, she seemed like she told a pretty complete story to me but admittedly I'm still trying to grasp a lot of it," She laughs, "The Human Realm is nothing like this world, Luz has told me that the rain here boils?"

“Yeah, it does,” Eda chuckles, “And so does the sea by our house.”

“Boiling Isles is a very fitting name,” Camila returns a laugh, both of them looking over when they hear someone coming down the stairs, Luz walking into the kitchen. Eda, although she has warmed up to Camila, immediately feels out of place when she walks in, letting Camila greet her daughter first. “Buenos días, mija.”

“Good morning,” Luz mumbles, walking over to the table where Eda set out a plate for Luz, “Is this mine?”

“Mhm, that’s for you, kid,” Eda tells her as she turns off the water, having finished washing the last dish, looking back at her, “Sorry, I haven’t been able to get my hands on spider bananas or brown mandrakes, so breakfast is going to be just eggs and meat for a little while.”

“Mhm,” Luz absently hums, going to walk back out of the room. Eda sighs and turns back to the sink defeated, a little peeved that she doesn’t even get a thank you. Camila, though, doesn’t let Luz walk away.

“Luz, hey, say thank you to Eda for cooking you breakfast,” Camila stops her, “Don’t walk away.”

“Thank you,” Luz unenthusiastically calls back as she goes back upstairs, Camila sighing and shaking her head, looking back at Eda.

“Sorry, she’s not having a good day today,” Camila puts back the last of the dishes Eda washed, “It’s just one of those days.”

“Mhm,” Eda hums, although she doesn’t say anything else.

“I know it’s hard to tell her what to do, but sometimes she needs it. Luz has always been like that, hot and cold,” Camila tells her, “Especially since Manny passed away, my husband. Luz told you about that, right?”

“Mhm, she was here for the anniversary, and she was acting just like that,” Eda nods, Camila giving her a sad smile.

“Yeah, it happens every year. But ever since then she’s been up and down, some days she’s happy and some she’s down like that. There’s nothing you can do but let it pass, either, which is difficult but Luz doesn’t like accepting a lot of help,” Camila leans one arm on the counter, “You’ve made her so much happier, though, I’ve never seen her more brightly explain anything that wasn’t about her book series. Being here was really great for her, and I never got a chance to thank you for making it such a good experience.”

“Oh, I mean, I did kind of get her into this mess,” Eda nervously replies, “I tried to send her back, I promise, but she just didn’t listen to me.”

Camila smiles, “No, you didn’t do that at all, Luz is the most strong-willed person I know, I don’t doubt that you tried a lot and she said no. That’s Luz for you.”

“I actually offered the very first day she came here, put her on Owlbert and told her to get out of here, and instead of listening to me she came back and started a rebellion at the Conformatorium,” Eda laughs, seeing Camila look at her in confusion. “Oh, it’s like the jail here, but it’s just all people locked up for stupid, little things that don’t ‘conform’ to Belos’ idea of normal witches, it’s pretty much entirely unjust. Sorry, forgot you don’t have those.”

“Ohh,” She nods in realization, laughing too, “Of course she did, that sounds so much like her.”

Eda smiles, feeling a weight has lifted off of her shoulders knowing that Camila doesn't resent her for keeping Luz in the Boiling Isles. She doesn't say anything else, though, letting Camila push the conversation.

"I'm very happy I finally got to meet you, Eda," Camila tells her, "And I'm very happy that Luz met you. I mean, I don't know a lot about anything here but if she had been found by someone else I don't know if her experience would have been the same at all. I'm glad that you were the one to look after her."

"Yeah, I mean, the Boiling Isles can be dangerous if you don't know what you're doing so I'm glad I was here to teach her the ropes and everything. Of course, she's more than adapted to it now," Eda shrugs, "She doesn't need me for as much anymore."

"Well, I don't know about that," Camila smiles at her, "I don't know if you know how much she missed you, she talked about you *all the time* . The kids drew pictures of their families here and she drew a picture of you, King, and Hooty. She really cares about you more than just as a guide, she cares for you like family. Even if she doesn't always show it like that."

Eda beams at the idea that Luz missed her *this* much, especially considering Luz wasn't particularly chatty yesterday. It makes sense, considering she was pretty down about King and not too into talking, but it's still nice to hear. Eda doesn't get to revel in the good feeling long, though, because she hears someone yell for her down the hall.

"Eda!" Willow calls, "Hunter wants you!"

"No, I don't!" Hunter also yells, Eda laughing and looking at Camila.

"I am fascinated that those two aren't dating," She tells her as she starts towards the living room.

"Honestly? Me too," Camila agrees as she follows, Eda walking into the living room and looking at Hunter and Willow on the couch, Hunter looking *very* embarrassed. Gus and Amity are preoccupied in the far corner of the room, where Amity is showing Gus something with her abominations.

"What's up, kid? What do you need?"

"Nothing, nothing, I'm sorry," He sheepishly apologizes, Willow just elbowing him. "Ow!"

"Ask her," She loudly whispers, "She doesn't bite, at least I don't think so."

"Nope, haven't bit anyone," Eda confirms, leaning against the doorway, "Now ask me, go ahead, I'm listening."

"Uh, I uh, I just," He stammers, looking over at Willow to see her smiling encouragingly before asking, "Can I go outside and walk today? Like, just outside, not far, and I'll go with Willow, but I just want to go outside please."

Eda smiles at him, and although a little hesitant about it she nods, "Yeah, sure, as long as someone goes with you and you don't push yourself it's fine with me. It'll probably be good for you to get outside."

His face shifts to relief, giving her a small smile, "Thank you."

"Of course," She smiles, "Speaking of you moving around, I think it's time to have you sleep in an actual room. As long as you feel well enough for it."

“Oh, uh, yeah, I think I do,” Hunter affirms, looking around at himself.

“We don’t need to think about it now, that’s a problem to tackle tonight,” She assures him, looking over to the corner when Gus yells to see a small abomination sitting on his head.

“Amity! Get it off!”

“No, he’s your friend! Like that little rat in that human movie,” Amity vanishes the abomination, laughing. Gus touches his head, trying to look up at it.

“Is that goop all in my hair?” He asks.

“No, I can just vanish it,” She replies, “Now it’s all gone.”

“Horrifying,” He marvels, smiling. In their moment of silence, Hunter picks back up the Rubik’s cube that Eda gave him, something that kept Luz occupied for a while when she found it so she figured it would be good for him. He, however, has not solved it yet, weird considering Luz could solve it almost immediately. Eda points at it.

“You still haven’t solved that thing?” She asks, Hunter shaking his head.

“No, this weird cube is impossible, Willow and I sat all afternoon yesterday working on it,” He tells her, “Have you tried it?”

“No, let me see,” Eda walks over, taking it and grabbing a seat on the armchair. She toys with it for a bit, looking up when Willow talks to Camila.

“Oh! Camila, I can show you the pictures from when Luz was here now! I have my scroll,” She summons her scroll into her hands, Camila looking at it confused.

“What is that?” She asks, walking over to sit down on the loveseat, right next to where Willow is on the couch.

“It’s a scroll! It’s a lot like Luz’s little phone thingy,” Willow tells her, starting to go through pictures to show her. Amity and Gus come over, too, showing her their pictures as well. Eda spends about five minutes with the cube puzzle before shaking her head, handing it back to Hunter.

“Forget this, kid, good luck,” She says.

“It’s hard, I told you,” He replies, “I don’t know how to do it.”

“It’s definitely a puzzle, I’m not getting anywhere near it,” She jokes, Hunter chuckling.

“I can solve it, well, I think,” He puts it down on the table, looking over when his name is brought up in conversation by Willow. He gets sucked into that conversation, in which Camila is being bombarded with pictures from the stories they’ve told her with Luz. Eda just chuckles to herself at the sight, hoping that this makes up for the lost time she had with Luz. Although, after her conversation with her today, she doesn’t think that the time was really considered lost. Which is great, considering Eda doesn’t want those few months to be the only time she gets to spend with Luz after this.

And right now, things are looking pretty good for her on that front.

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Luz looks up from where she's blankly staring at one of her Azura books when someone knocks on the door. "Luz," Amity calls into the room, "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," Luz calls back, closing the book and setting it off to the side. Amity opens the door and pokes her head in, smiling at her.

"Hi," She greets, walking in and shutting the door behind her, "How was your breakfast?"

"Alright," Luz shrugs, not really keen on small talk right now.

"Mhm, that's good," Amity nods, hesitating before pointing back with her thumb, telling Luz, "Everyone is hanging out downstairs, I just wanted to know if you wanted to come down. I get it if you want some alone time, too, but I just wanted to offer because it would be cool to have you down there, too."

Luz feels torn at the offer, really not believing that things would be any better with her there. She just shakes her head, "No thanks, I'm alright for now."

Amity looks at her concerned, "Is everything alright? You seem off today."

"Yeah, everything is fine," Luz weakly assures her, a part of her hoping that Amity pushes back at her enough to make her talk about what's going on. That doesn't happen, though, Amity just nodding, her expression falling a bit.

"Alright, if you say so I don't want to push. I'll be downstairs, you can come down if you want. I'd love to hang out with you," She offers again, Luz deflating a bit at her relenting so fast and just nodding. Amity gives her a warm smile, which Luz barely reciprocates, watching her girlfriend walk out of the room. When she shuts the door, Luz flops back onto her pillow, putting her hands over her eyes and groaning. She doesn't know what's wrong with her today but she just can't find it in herself to do *anything* . She wants nothing more than to take up Amity's offer and go down to hang out with everyone, but something keeps her shackled to her sleeping bag. She stares absently up at the ceiling as her head swarms again in the absence of something to do, thinking about how *off* that interaction with Amity felt.

Her gut reaction is to be upset at her for just walking out, considering that Amity knows that Luz has a hard time sharing things with her sometimes. But that feeling is quickly replaced by the all too familiar guilty weight that just sits in her stomach, reminding her that this is her fault, too. If she weren't so hard to please, or so difficult to be with, or so shut off, then *maybe* Amity wouldn't have to push her for anything. And maybe then she would've been in here talking to her, holding her as she reassures Luz that this horrible feeling of hopelessness and never-ending guilt will pass at some point. But of course, Luz isn't like that, and Amity doesn't even know Luz feels like that at all.

After the spiral starts to turn from just feeling guilty to feeling nauseous, Luz sits up and looks around for something else to do to distract her, although the thought of reading seems far too daunting right now. She looks at the door, thinking about her options for a minute. She could go sit in Eda's window to clear her head, which normally helps, but every time she does that she just gets endless horrible thoughts about King not being here. She could go outside and take a walk, but that's just going to make her think about King too. She could stay in here, but now that she's thought about her options she's thinking about how King isn't here, leaving only going to hang out with her friends as an option.

She sighs, standing up and shuffling her feet over to the door, walking out and going down the hall and down the stairs, hearing laughing from the living room. She walks closer, leaning into the doorway to see Eda sitting on the armchair and her mom sitting on the loveseat, Amity and Gus sitting on the floor. Hunter is on the couch by himself, sitting towards the side where Eda is in the armchair, and Willow is on the loveseat next to Luz's mom. The sight immediately makes her turn around to leave, although Hunter spots her too quickly.

"Hey Luz," He greets, everyone going quiet and looking over, although they all smile. Hunter beckons Luz over, "You can come sit over here if you want."

Luz walks into the room, squeezing by Gus and Amity to walk over and sit next to Hunter, although awkwardly far from him. She's not really sure where she stands with Hunter right now, and all she knows is that she feels really horrible about everything that happened with him. Between having to tell everyone he's a Grimwalker to what happened in the Human Realm, one of her strongest sources of guilt recently has been seeing him. She angles her body away from him a bit, the room being very awkwardly quiet before he starts talking again.

"Luz, do you think you know how to solve this cube?" He questions, picking up the Rubik's cube Luz saw him with yesterday off the coffee table and holding it out to show her. "Willow and I are out of ideas."

Luz looks down at it, then up at him, then back down at the cube and shrugging, "I have no idea."

She doesn't miss Eda's confused glance in her mom's direction, Luz sure they both know that she *does* know how to solve a Rubik's cube, fast actually. She just doesn't feel like doing it right now, the thought of everyone reacting to it and inevitably having to teach them makes her feel icky. So, instead, she doesn't say anything else, Hunter just nodding and putting back down the cube on the table.

"We'll get it one day, I guess," He shrugs, Gus whispering something to Amity. The two of them start talking again, and as everyone else falls back into conversions, Luz has no motivation to say anything to anyone. She just sits there, arms crossed, frown deeper than it was in her room. She looks up when she hears Darius yelling.

"Eda!" He calls, "I need to talk to you!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming, keep your pants on," She huffs, getting up and walking out of the room. Luz looks over when her mom gets up, too, stepping around Amity and Gus, although considering none of them look surprised Luz figures that her mom told them she was leaving. She just leaves without saying anything, Luz sinking back into the couch a bit. Willow, Amity, and Gus start talking about something Luz really isn't listening to, Luz just emptily smiles whenever one of them looks over. She does, though, tune into the distinct chirping of Flapjack in Hunter's lap, hearing Hunter whisper back at him.

"Buddy, I don't know, I know she is," He quietly answers the bird, Flapjack chirping again, "I don't know, I hope so."

Flapjack begins to twitter something at Hunter, Hunter not answering. Flapjack just does it again, Hunter sighing before going to protest.

"Flap, I don't think-" Flapjack cuts him off, tweeting again, more indignant this time. "Ok, ok, fine," Hunter relents, tapping Luz on the shoulder. Luz looks over at him, the sight of scars all over Hunter's face making her stomach twist into a tighter knot than before. "Flapjack wants you to hold him," Hunter tells her.

Luz contemplates the offer, but the flashing image of Flapjack getting hurt because Luz didn't protect him stops her from taking him. "I don't want to, I'm good," She denies, hearing Flapjack tweet at Hunter, staring up at him.

"He's really insistent about it, he's asked me three times," Hunter presses.

"No, I don't want to," Luz denies again, feeling herself start to get irritated that Hunter doesn't magically immediately understand her internal struggle with holding Flapjack.

"Are you sure-"

"Yes! I don't want him, stop asking!" She snaps at him, seeing Hunter's eyes widen in fear. It takes her a second to register what just came out of her mouth. Once she does, though, her body just snaps into flight mode and carries her out of the room, getting her *out* of that situation as fast as she can. She goes back upstairs, almost going straight into her room but stopping when she hears talking coming from Eda's room, looking over. She doesn't even think about it before she takes a few, quiet steps up to the door, pressing her ear to it to hear what's going on inside.

"Eda, these kids know things that *we don't* , and we can't make any kind of a plan to stop the Collector or *Belos* if we don't talk to them," Darius argues, his voice hushed.

"Have you seen Hunter? He's in no fit state to sit down and talk about all of that, he needs to recover more first before I'm going to be sure it's not going to send him into a panic attack and collapse a lung," Eda clips back, just as quietly.

"Then we don't need him," Darius reasons, "Leave him out of it."

"First off, that's mean, and second I don't think any of them are ready," Eda counters, "Especially Luz, she's had a *very* off morning and I don't think reliving all of the trauma she just went through is what the doctor ordered."

"You're really going to prioritize some kids over the entirety of the Boiling Isles?" He questions, Eda humming back.

"Mhm, absolutely, especially *mine* ," She points out, Luz oddly hearing Darius laugh.

"You know, I thought that the most dangerous witch on the Boiling Isles would be all cold and hardened, not just some overly devoted mom," He jokes, Eda laughing back. Luz doesn't stay to listen to anything else, though, feeling tears start to prick at her eyes hearing that yet *another* thing is her fault.

She doesn't bother walking quietly, going back into her room and slamming the door behind herself, sliding down the door to sit on the ground, burying her face in her knees. She doesn't try to stop crying, just wrapping her arms around her buried head and sobbing, a horrible, twisting, sick feeling relentlessly grabbing at her stomach. She doesn't get to sit and cry for long, though, when someone knocks on her door not even two minutes later.

"Hey, Luz, are you alright kid?" Eda calls inside, Luz leaning her head back against the door and yelling back, trying to sound as normal as possible.

"Yeah," She replies, not hearing Eda leave. A moment later, Eda continues.

"Are you sure? Can I come in?" She asks, Luz knowing she's in no fit state to see Eda right now. She isn't thinking clearly enough to voice that, though, getting her to leave in the only way her fuzzy brain knows how.

“No, I don’t want you coming in, go away,” She clips at her.

“Kid-”

“Go away, Eda,” Luz cuts her off, letting a bit of brokenness slip into her voice. Eda sighs.

“Alright, just- just come and find me if you need anything, I’m always here,” She tells her, Luz just humming. She hears Eda walk off, Luz resuming burying her head and letting out the sobs that she’d been trying to push back down at when Eda was on the other side of the door. No one else comes up to see her, not that she deserves anyone else anyway. All she’s doing is causing problems. Problems problems problems, the only thing Luz is good at making. She’s just waiting for everyone else to realize that and leave her, too. Who knows, maybe after what happened with Hunter they’ll all start to see it. Maybe being alone will be good for her.

She already feels like she is all the time, anyway.

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Hunter fiddles with the cube, really having no motivation to do any work on it. He’s been a little on edge since Luz snapped at him, the puzzle doing nothing but frustrating him rather than distracting him. Luz’s yelling killed the mood, so Gus and Amity left pretty soon after it. Willow went outside, Hunter just telling her he’d join her whenever he feels like it. Right now he really just wants to sit here in silence, but footsteps coming from down the hall seem to want to ruin that.

A woman he doesn’t know sticks her head into the room, widely smiling and greeting him, “Oh, hello, you must be the Hunter I’ve heard so much about.”

“Uh, uh, yeah, yeah I’m Hunter,” He nervously replies, pulling Flapjack a bit closer to him on instinct.

“It’s great to meet you, dear, I’ve heard all about the story of you and your bird, Dell told me all about it.”

“Oh, uh, ok,” He awkwardly answers as she walks into the room and sits down on the loveseat, Hunter having *no* idea who this is.

“Oh, my apologies, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Gwendolyn, Edalyn’s mother,” She tells him, “And your bird there, is that Flapjack?”

“Uh,” He shies away from her, really not too keen on giving out details about Flapjack. It’s an uncomfortable subject for him. She doesn’t seem to care, continuing anyway.

“He’s very cute, he looks just like Dell’s palisman, a little cardinal. Did you carve him?” She continues to press, Hunter starting to panic. He’s *very* luckily saved, though, when Eda yells down the hallway.

“Mom! Hey!” She steps into the doorway, looking at her mom annoyed, “I said give him a few days before he has to deal with you. You’re way too overwhelming.”

“Witchlet, I’m just saying hello. I’ve heard so much, I just wanted to see this bird you carved a whole new wing for, admire your handiwork,” She dismisses her, Eda taking one glance at Hunter

before pointing backward with her thumb towards the tower.

“No, out, you out, you can ‘admire my handiwork’ another day,” She walks over, shooing her mom away, “Today is not the day for small talk.”

Her mom groans, “Alright, fine, I’ll come back another day. It was nice meeting you though, Hunter.”

Hunter just gives her a weird, nervous smile as she walks out of the room, Eda immediately walking over and grabbing a seat next to him.

“What’s up with you, kid? You look scared, did my mom do something? Sorry, she’s a little overbearing sometimes,” Eda chuckles, although Hunter really isn’t in a laughing mood. Eda’s expression shifts to concern, continuing to press, more seriously this time, “Is something bothering you?”

Hunter shrugs, turning himself away a bit, but Eda just grabs him gently by both shoulders and turns him back to face her.

“No, I want to look at you, don’t turn away,” She stops him, “Remember, I always want to look at you, none of that ‘I did something wrong you don’t want to see me’ business.”

Hunter can’t help but smile at that, although it doesn’t last long. The bad, nervous feeling from earlier drags him right back down, Eda instantly noticing it.

“Come on, I know there’s something up, I’m here to listen. I promise,” She assures him, Hunter *very* hesitant about sharing what happened with Luz. He knows how close Luz and Eda are, and he’s not sure telling Eda about Luz doing something bad is going to sit well with her. He doesn’t hate her, but he knows that getting his point across right is something he struggles with. “Hmm,” Eda hums after a minute of him not answering, “Are you feeling bad? Hurting at all?”

Hunter shakes his head.

“Is Flapjack hurt?”

He shakes his head again.

“Did your friends abandon you?”

Another head shake.

“Did you have a bad night last night?”

Hunter shakes his head again, Eda staring at him quizzically this time before smiling and asking him.

“Was it the breakfast I made this morning? Was it that bad?” She asks, Hunter looking at her confused and shaking his head again. She tries again, “Oh, it must be you hate the decoration in the living room, isn’t it?”

Hunter cracks a smile, being able to tell that she’s joking, and shakes his head. Eda laughs, letting the slightly eased tension sit for a minute before she nudges him again.

“Ok, kid, really, what’s going on?” She asks, much more seriously this time, “Did something happen with one of your friends?”

Hunter just shrugs, although the answer is yes. She seems to know that too, somehow, even though he didn't tell her because she sighs.

"Was it Luz?" She asks, Hunter nervously nodding. She just gives him a sad smile, "Yeah, she's been off all morning. What happened with her? Was it when she was down here earlier after I left?"

Hunter nods, looking down at Flapjack, who is staring at him encouragingly before telling her, "She uh, just snapped at me. Flapjack wanted her to hold him and I guess I asked too many times and she yelled at me to stop asking."

"Mmm, yeah, she probably just got overwhelmed, but it wasn't ok for her to snap at you at all. I'm sorry that happened, but I don't think she's going to talk to you again anytime today. She's been dismissive all day today, so I think give it a day to relax," She rubs his arm, "She didn't mean it though, kid, I don't think she did at all. She just gets down sometimes and I think it was just overwhelming, no one's fault."

Hunter nods, but he doesn't say anything, really not wanting to talk about it right now. He's just not in a good mood, and he feels more comfortable sitting here quietly than talking to anyone at the moment.

"Would you rather me leave you alone?" She asks, Hunter very apprehensively nodding. Eda just smiles, though, "No problem, I get it. I'll be around if you need anything, though."

He nods, muttering, "Thank you."

She ruffles his hair before getting up and walking out of the room, leaving Hunter alone again. Flapjack pecks at him lightly, just to grab his attention, Hunter looking down to see Flapjack looking very sad.

"What's up, Flap?" He asks, scratching the bird's head.

"Flapjack sorry," Flapjack chirps, *"Hunter sad."*

"Hey, it's not your fault, buddy, you just wanted to cheer her up," Hunter assures him, "She'll be ok again, just right now she's having a rough day. You heard what Eda said. And I'm ok, too, you don't need to worry about me."

Flapjack hops in Hunter's lap towards his stomach, nuzzling against him. Hunter just pets the small bird in his lap, looking out the window on the other side of the room. He probably should go out with Willow, it's a nice day out and he's been cooped up on the same couch for two days. Although he doesn't really feel like talking at all, he thinks Willow will understand, so he scoops up Flapjack and gets up, going down the hallway and into the kitchen, waving at Mrs. Noceda, Eda, and Raine sitting at the table when he walks in.

"Are you going outside, kid?" Eda asks, Hunter nodding. "Willow is doing something right outside, you'll see her. Don't wander off alone, the last thing I need on my record is to lose a kid. Theft is enough for me."

Hunter just chuckles at the comment, quietly assuring her, "I won't."

"Good," She smiles back, "Have fun!"

Hunter continues out the back door, seeing Willow growing a plant up against the back of the house. She looks over when Hunter walks out, happily smiling at him. "Hi Hunter!" She happily

greets, “I’ve been making Eda a little garden back here, but then I got distracted seeing how vines would look on the back of the house. Hooty approves of it he said, although he also said some other, really weird stuff I chose not to listen to. I’ve just been toying with it, nothing much.”

“Mhm,” Hunter hums. Willow stares at him for a minute, seemingly analyzing him before smiling again.

“You can go sit if you want, on that stump over there,” She points back behind her, where there’s a stump a bit away from the house, “It’s a nice day out today.”

“Mhm, it is,” He affirms as he walks over to sit down on the stump, pulling his legs up to sit cross crossed and hold Flapjack in his lap, looking at Willow grow more wrapping vines off of the one she’s created. She doesn’t talk to him at all, and Hunter *really* appreciates it. He really just wants to sit in the sun and watch right now, no talking, no listening, no processing. Not alone, but alone enough. A good balance.

Plus Willow is here, too, and that always makes him feel a bit brighter.

***

Eda leans against Raine as they quietly hum a song she’s never heard, relaxing every muscle in her body from the oddly really stressful day she had. Everyone needed something from her, it seemed like, and on top of that Luz was just moping around everywhere. She made Hunter upset in the morning and he got really quiet, and Eda is pretty sure she also overheard her conversation with Darius and got upset about it. No matter how many times Eda offered to talk to her, though, Luz denied every one, and when Luz feels off it seems to just bleed into everyone else’s mood too because by nighttime the kids were all kind of sad like that. It was a good night to put Hunter in Willow and Gus’ room so at least he isn’t alone overnight. He didn’t seem too keen on sleeping, though, which Eda is mildly concerned about but definitely doesn’t have the capacity to deal with right now. Once she went to bed she ended up tossing and turning for an hour, Raine deciding to stay up with her to help her wind down a bit. Now she’s finally calmed down, lazily staring out the big stained glass window they’re sitting on the ground in front of in Eda’s room.

She rests her head on Raine’s shoulder, Raine taking the hand that was around her waist and beginning to card through her hair a bit, resting their head on top of hers as they keep humming, Eda both able to hear it and feel it. Her eyes start to get heavy, her left hand toying with Raine’s pajama pants. She perks right up, though, when she hears a floorboard squeak very close to their room, Eda immediately looking back and feeling Raine’s hands return back to them. She sees a blonde-headed blur quickly move out of the doorway, Eda just chuckling.

“Hunter,” She calls just loud enough for him to hear, “I know you’re there, kid.”

“Sorry,” He squeaks back, stepping into the doorway and looking *very* scared, tears running down his cheeks, Flapjack hidden in his hands that are held outside of the doorframe so Eda can’t see him. It’s a horribly, kind of heartbreaking habit that Eda hasn’t ever seen him do, although she knows *exactly* why he does it.

“Hey, you’re ok, I just wanna know why you’re up so late,” She says, “Are you ok?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, sorry. I’ll go back to bed,” He shrinks away from her a bit, Eda not about to let

him walk away that quickly.

“No, there’s something up, kid, come here,” She beckons him, patting the spot on the floor next to her. Hunter looks over when Flapjack tweets at him, Hunter nodding before walking into the room, over to sit where Eda pat, admittedly a little far from her. She just smiles at him, though, “Can’t sleep?”

He shrugs, not saying anything.

“Then what brings you in here?” She asks, “Are you feeling alright?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah I feel ok,” He nods, wiping his eyes with one hand and beginning to ramble through an explanation, “I mean, I just- I had a bad dream and then I didn’t want to wake anyone up but I was being loud so I just went walking and I heard something from in here and it- it sounded nice so I peeked in here and then there was this huge window that looked cool- I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

“No, it’s perfectly ok, you don’t need to apologize. Take a deep breath,” She advises him, Hunter listening and taking a deep breath in and out. Eda continues to reassure him, “I don’t care that you looked in here, for the record, I’m not hiding anything. And I agree, the window is very cool, it’s very pretty when the sun shines through it during the day. You’re always welcome to come in here and look at it, I don’t care at all.”

Hunter looks at her a moment, seemingly assessing her expression before nodding, looking down at Flapjack in his hands before he nervously answers, “Uh, I just- I can just go back, thank you for showing me.”

“You don’t have to leave if you don’t want to, kid, you’re welcome to sit for however long you want,” She encourages him, and although he hesitates, he still shakes his head.

“No, no, I can- I can go,” He tries to insist, although anyone could hear how much he *doesn’t* want to leave in his voice. Eda is very surprised when Raine cuts in to counter him.

“Why don’t you stay a bit? I was going to hum the same song from before, if you want to hear it,” They offer, Hunter perking up a bit this time.

“Oh, uh, yeah, I can stay then,” He agrees, Eda looking over at Raine impressed. They just smile and wink at her, moving over to make a space between them.

“Come sit here,” They tell Hunter, who walks around the back of Eda to sit between her and Raine. He sits crisscrossed with Flapjack cupped in his hands in his lap, favoring sitting a bit closer to Eda, although he’s not touching either of them. Raine begins to hum the same song from before again, starting back at the beginning. Eda feels how much more calming magic they let slip into the sound, although she isn’t nearly as impacted by it. She does see, however, Hunter’s eyes begin to drift more closed, clearly a lot more relaxed.

After a couple of minutes go by, Hunter’s head starts falling forward, although he jolts back up after a moment. He does that again a couple of times before Eda just decides to wrap an arm around him, in his clearly sleepy state, and gently push his head onto her shoulder. The moment he’s comfortable he knocks right out, eyes completely closed and letting out his funny little sleeping whistle. It causes Raine to stop humming and laugh, looking up at Eda.

“He whistles when he sleeps?” They whisper to her, Eda nodding.

“Mhm,” She affirms, “The gap in his teeth whistles, isn’t it oddly really endearing?”

“It is cute,” They smile, “It’s also cute that *you* care so much about him.”

Eda blushes at the comment. “I mean, come on, someone has to. He’s a sweet kid who I don’t think has ever felt loved before, Rainestorm, did I tell you what he told me the other day?” She asks, Raine shaking their head. “He apologized to me for getting hurt and then turned to face away from me because he didn’t understand why I would want to look at him after he caused me trouble, how *heartbreaking* is that?”

Raine stares at her in shock, “Horribly, wow.”

“Yeah, I know,” She looks down at him, a piece of hair falling in Hunter’s face, Eda seeing his face scrunch up at it. She brushes it away, Hunter’s expression relaxing again. She smiles, looking up at Raine, “Do you think he slept last night?”

Raine shakes their head, “No, I don’t think so. He knocked right out when he came in here.”

“Willow was telling me the other day that Hunter never slept a lot in the Human Realm, and considering what he looks like I don’t think he ever has,” She muses, “Well, he’s asleep now that he’s in here, I think it would be cruel to put him back into his room. Do you mind if we set him up in a sleeping bag here?”

Raine shakes their head, “Not at all, I’ll even go grab one for you. He shares a sleeping bag with Willow, right? So I should just get one from the hallway closet?”

“Mhm, yeah, thanks, Rainestorm,” Eda smiles at Raine when they get up, Raine just smiling back at her before walking out of the room. Eda rubs Hunter’s arm as she waits, surprised that he didn’t stir at all at their conversation. She figures he’s probably tired, though, so it makes sense that he’s knocked out at the first sense of comfort.

Raine comes back in quickly with a sleeping bag and a pillow, Eda glancing at them before looking at Hunter, thinking about *how* she’s going to move him like this, with his hands cupping Flapjack in his lap and his legs crossed.

“Raine, do you have any idea how we’re going to move him?” She asks, looking back at Raine. Raine shrugs, putting down the stuff they’re carrying.

“Uh, maybe put Flapjack on the bed? And then you can pick him up and put him in the sleeping bag? Does that sound like it’ll work?” Raine hesitantly suggests.

“It’s worth a shot,” She shrugs with her free shoulder, Raine coming around and carefully taking Flapjack from Hunter, Flapjack looking up at Raine but not making a sound. Raine sets him on the bed, Eda carefully moving to maneuver Hunter into her arms so she’s cradling him in her arms. She steps back to let Raine set up the sleeping bag next to the window. They unzip it for her, Eda setting Hunter down, very clearly seeing him crack his eyes open a bit and look around, although he clamps his eyes back shut after he assesses that everything is ok. Eda just chuckles to herself as she sets him down, covering him up with the other side of the sleeping bag as Raine puts Flapjack back onto his chest. Hunter moves his hands up to rest on top of the bird, who settles down into his chest.

Eda ruffles Hunter’s hair, knowing he can hear her, and quietly telling him, “Goodnight, kid.”

She sees Hunter smile, Eda standing back up and looking at Raine, giving them a thumbs up. They smile back at her, both of them walking over to their bed and climbing in. Eda does one more check on Hunter before looking over at Raine, seeing them beaming at her.

“What are you smiling at?” She asks.

“You have become such a mom, Eda,” They muse, “Looking after him.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, like *you* didn’t sing him to sleep,” She pokes back at them.

“What can I say?” They chuckle, “He wanted to hear the song. And if it puts him to sleep, too, that’s just convenient.”

“Mhm, just a coincidence, definitely,” Eda sarcastically replies, “You had *no* influence on that.”

“Mm-mm, no, of course not, and I have no influence on that,” They put an arm under Eda’s neck, Eda laying on top of their chest as they tell her, “And I have no influence on this, either.”

Eda smiles as they start humming like before, the same calming song. Eda feels their chest vibrate as they do, the sound and the feeling both quickly lulling her off to sleep, Eda’s eyes drifting closed almost immediately.

And she really can’t fault Hunter for falling asleep, because she’s out like a light, too.

A Glow in the Dark

Chapter Notes

> let's remember guys!!! theyre all like 15 and 16 and gus is like literally 13!!!!! they are not professionals!!!

Hunter sits up and looks back when he hears Raine and Eda stir, Hunter having been lying awake in their room, staring out the pretty stained glass window and watching Flapjack hop around. After sleepily greeting each other, Eda leans around the bed to see Hunter looking back at them, smiling at him.

“Morning, kid,” She says, Raine sitting up to see him too, “How did you sleep?”

“Uh, good,” He replies, putting down his hand so Flapjack can jump into it.

“Good,” She stretches her arms up, yawning before telling him, “I’m going to go downstairs and make breakfast, you can come or hang out here, it doesn’t bother me.”

“Mhm, ok,” Hunter nods, Eda and Raine both getting up out of bed, heading downstairs. Hunter pulls his legs to his chest and looks out the window, putting his hands on top of his knees so Flapjack is right up next to his face. Flapjack looks at him intently, Hunter looking at him confused. “What’s up, buddy? Why’re you looking at me like that?”

“Hunter think,” Flapjack chirps back, *“Tell Flapjack?”*

“I’m just thinking about what happened with Luz yesterday, I feel like I should talk to her about it,” Hunter tells him, “I mean, I don’t know, maybe it’ll make things a lot worse but talking normally works for other people with Luz, so why not me?”

Flapjack nods, *“Hunter right, human girl sad.”*

“She did look very sad yesterday, yeah, I’m worried about her,” Hunter sighs, “I don’t know, she’s always there for me, I want to be there for her. I mean, she helped save your life! I want to thank her for it, and talk to her about what’s been going on. Make sure she’s doing ok too. I don’t know, something feels more off than usual.”

“Human girl no with purple hair,” Flapjack points out, Hunter nodding.

“Yeah, I didn’t see Luz with Amity at all yesterday, normally they’re always together,” Hunter agrees, “That and Willow told me that Amity told her that Eda said Luz knows how to solve our little color cube, but when I asked she said she didn’t know. Which is weird, why would she lie to me? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Hunter ask?” Flapjack tweets questioningly.

“Yeah, I think I’ll ask, maybe I’ll talk to Willow about it too,” Hunter thinks out loud, which he immediately regrets when Flapjack starts going off on his mantra.

“Hunter talk pretty girl! Pretty girl pretty girl!” Flapjack enthusiastically chirps at him, Hunter

groaning and standing up.

“Nope, no more, I’m done talking to you,” He says as he walks out of the room, slowly making his way down the stairs and into the kitchen, where Willow is already sitting at the table, immediately sitting up and smiling when Hunter walks in.

“Hunter! Hi, good morning,” She happily greets, Hunter walking over to sit next to her, facing where Eda is making breakfast, Raine’s arms wrapped around her waist and their head on her shoulder. Good to see they’ve stopped pretending they’re not all touchy with one another because Hunter certainly noticed they were poorly trying to hide it. Willow immediately turns to him and tells him, “You were gone this morning! I thought you evaporated or something.”

“How would I evaporate?” He questions, confused.

Willow laughs, “Just an exaggerated example, I didn’t think you actually evaporated.”

“Oh,” He nods, chuckling and setting Flapjack down on the table, “No, I didn’t evaporate. I just couldn’t sleep last night, so I went walking.”

“Mhm, I figured,” She nods, luckily not pressing the topic any further. Hunter is definitely a *little* embarrassed about falling asleep in Eda and Raine’s room because that is definitely a little embarrassing. Hunter does take this opportunity, though, to get Willow’s opinion on what he was talking to Flapjack about this morning.

“Oh, can I ask you about something?” He asks, Willow smiling and nodding.

“Of course,” She agrees, “What’s up? Is everything ok?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, everything is fine,” He assures her, “But uh, I think I have to talk to Luz about, you know, everything that happened in the Human Realm and yesterday and everything. I think there’s something wrong with her and I want to be there for her like she’s there for me, does that make sense?”

“Mhm, yeah, I think that’s a good idea. I mean, there’s definitely something up with Luz, and I think talking to you would be a good start to working through everything that happened,” Willow agrees, drumming her fingers on the table before admitting, “If I’m honest, I’m a little mad at her running off without getting any of us.”

“That was kind of *really* my fault,” Hunter reminds her.

“Hunter, if you ran off claiming you could see Belos I would go get the group because *that’s* weird,” Willow corrects him, “Look, I’m not like, forever mad at her about it. I’m just a little annoyed because she does that all the time, and this time it got you and Flapjack really hurt. If she had just gotten us from the start that wouldn’t have happened.”

“You can’t hold that against her, though, she made one wrong choice, it doesn’t mean it’s her fault I got hurt,” Hunter argues, “Neither me nor Flapjack hold it against her.”

“Flapjack like human girl,” Flapjack chirps in agreement, Hunter gesturing down at him.

“See, Flapjack said he likes Luz still, neither of us are mad,” Hunter tells her.

“I know you both aren’t but, I don’t know, I’m just working through it. I know it’s not her fault, but I just need to process it I guess. Everything, for that matter, Luz did a lot of stuff without telling anyone that just worried us all sick. I was talking to Amity about it, actually, a couple of nights

ago, and she said she needed to talk to Luz about that. Amity said she lies a *lot* , and even though it's not out of anything mean it is just hard to navigate sometimes. I don't know, I'm worried about it," Willow puts her head down on the table, on top of her folded arms. She sighs, "I don't know, I'm torn. I love Luz a lot, she's like one of my best friends and she's done so much great stuff for me, but it's felt impossible to get her to actually talk to any of us. I don't know, maybe you can get to her, get her to open up about what's going on, just so we can help. I don't know, I don't know," She groans, taking her glasses off and putting her face in her hands. Hunter hesitates, but mirrors what she does to him and rubs her arm, Willow looking over at him.

Hunter immediately takes his hand away, "Sorry!"

"Oh, no, it's ok!" She assures him, smiling, "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you, I appreciate it a lot."

"Oh, uh, ok," Hunter puts his hand back, rubbing her arm again. Willow moves closer and leans against him, making Hunter wrap his arm around her, holding her in front of him. He blushes *so* hard, ears happily twitching at how *he* gets to hold Willow and comfort her. Flapjack jumps on the table.

"Hunter red! Hunter red!"

"Flapjack, I swear," Hunter says through gritted teeth, Willow sitting up a bit and looking back at him, likely seeing how red his face is and laughing.

"Is he teasing you?" She asks.

"Uh- uh yeah- yeah he is," He nods, looking up when he sees Eda glance back and chuckle, whispering something to Raine. It makes him blush even harder, embarrassed they can totally tell what's going on.

Willow just moves back to lean against him, her head leaning on the front of his shoulder, looking up and asking, "Is this ok? I can move."

"Oh, no, no this is totally ok, completely ok," He jumps to assure her, Willow just beaming. Hunter has *no* idea what to do and he's probably *so* tense right now, but Willow seems really comfortable. She's stressed about Luz, and Hunter wants to be there for her, but this is *totally* foreign to him. He's doing an ok job, he thinks, and with anyone else, he probably wouldn't be this worried about it. But it's *Willow* . It's totally different.

A couple of minutes later Eda turns fully around, walking over with a little vial of something green and a roll of bandaging, Willow sitting up when she does. Eda just smiles, sitting down across from them and saying, "I'm not looking, lovebirds, keep doing whatever you're doing."

Both Willow and Hunter immediately separate, Hunter looking over at her to see her just giving him a satisfied smile, Hunter unsure how she's not *completely* embarrassed. Eda just laughs as she pats the table in front of her.

"Come here, Flapjack, it's been a couple of days, let's rebandage you, buddy," She tells him, Flapjack hopping over to stand right in front of her, Hunter immediately forgetting about how horribly embarrassed he is and intently watching her work with Flapjack. The past couple of days all they've done is put some potion on his new wing, no new bandages, so *this* is worrying for him. However, Eda must see his expression shift because she reassures him, "All I'm doing is putting on some new bandages, kid. I've done this a million times before, I promise I'll be gentle with him."

Hunter nods, but still watches as Eda carefully unwraps Flapjack, pouring some of the green potion she has onto his wing before wrapping him back up again like nothing happened. Flapjack doesn't even tweet once, Eda scratches his head.

"Alright, you're all set, I told you it would be easy," She says to Flapjack, who looks back at Hunter and tweets at him

"Tell Owl Lady Flapjack thank you!" Flapjack tells him, Hunter smiling.

"Wow, that was articulate, buddy," Hunter marvels, looking up at Eda, "Flapjack said thank you."

"You're quite welcome," Eda pats him on the head before she gets up and goes back over to where Raine has taken up making breakfast for her. Not even a minute later Gus comes bounding into the room, smiling *awfully* big.

"Good morning friends!" Gus dramatically greets, grabbing a seat in front of Hunter and Willow, going to continue but stopping when Flapjack tweets at him. "Ok, and good morning to you too, little buddy," Gus scratches him on the head.

"You're awfully excited this morning, Gus, what did you do?" Willow asks.

"Psh!" He waves her off, "Nothing, I'm just having a fantastic morning."

"What did you do?" Willow asks again, more apprehensively.

"Alright, well, I might have gone into a closet looking for something unimportant this morning and a box of something *may* have rolled out at me and I *might* have put those funny glowing human stars on our ceiling and left some outside of Luz's door for her and Amity when they get up," Gus excitedly tells them, "Huh? Aren't I amazing?"

Eda laughs, looking back and asking, "Goops, what closet were you in that you found those?"

"Oh, uh, I uh, I don't remember," He shakes his head, "They all look the same."

"The kid has a point, Eda," Raine agrees, "All your hallway closets look completely identical."

"Ok, ok, maybe they do," She concedes, "But I didn't even know I *had* those. Luz asked me about them forever ago and I said I'd never come across them."

"They were in a box for some human tool. Uh, chippers? Cutters?"

"Clippers?" Willow asks, "Did it look like it could cut a bush? Like with the little prongs on the end?"

"Yeah, yeah it did," He nods, "How did you know about that?"

"Camila used those to cut Hunter's hair that one time," Willow tells him, "They were so weird, they like, vibrate really fast and have this little detachable piece that keeps you safe from the sharp part. Right, Hunter?"

Hunter nods, "Mhm, and they were loud."

"Yeah, they made this weird vibrating sound too," Willow nods.

"Well, I don't know what these are but I'm glad you found the stars, Luz will probably love those," Eda chimes in, looking over when Amity comes into the room, notably without Luz. "Good

morning, boots, where's your other half?"

"She wanted to stay in bed today," Amity shrugs, frowning, "I don't know, I tried."

"And that's all you can do," Eda reaches over and ruffles Amity's hair, Amity just chuckling and walking over to the table to sit next to Gus and across from Hunter.

"Good morning guys," She greets, clearly unenthusiastic.

"Good morning, Amity," Willow greets, "Are you ok?"

"Mhm, yeah, just tired," Amity assures her, Hunter, Willow, and Gus looking at each other suspiciously. Flapjack hops over to Amity, looking at Hunter a moment before wordlessly tweeting at her. "Hey, good morning Flapjack. You're chatty this morning."

"He woke up hyper this morning, I don't know what did it," Hunter shrugs, Flapjack looking back at him.

"Purple hair sad," He tells Hunter, Hunter just humming back at him. Hunter leans around Amity to see Ghost walking into the room, Amity looking back to follow his gaze.

"Hello Ghost, what happened to keeping Luz company?" She asks, rubbing her fingers together to call Ghost up onto the table. She hops up onto the bench and then the table, Flapjack hopping over to sit in front of Hunter, Ghost settling right up against Amity. Amity runs a hand through her hair, looking over at Gus and Willow. "Where are Clover and Emmy?"

"Sleeping upstairs, probably," Willow shrugs, looking at Gus, "Did you see them?"

"Yeah, Clover helped me put the stars up on the ceiling," Gus affirms, Amity and Willow looking at him confused.

"Stars?" Amity questions

"Clover helped you?" Willow asks, " *How* ?"

Gus points at Amity first, "Little glow-in-the-dark stars like Luz has on her bunk bed," Gus points at Willow, "There *may* be a small hole in every star where Clover held onto it."

"Wait, did *we* get any stars?" Amity asks, Gus nodding.

"Yeah! They're outside your door, I left them there because I figured I didn't want to wake you guys up and I didn't know if you were awake so it was better to just leave them out there but now thinking about it there's no way you would've seen it because that box was kind of small," Gus rambles, stopping to look around at everyone, "Yeah, well, I didn't really think that surprise through, did I?"

"No, but it was a nice thought," Amity smiles, looking back when an abomination comes walking into the room. It goes over to where Eda is cooking, Raine just whistling and drawing a circle and blasting a hole through its face, causing it to melt and fade away.

"If you want food, you need to come in here!" Eda yells down the hallway, Darius and Alador coming into the room, Darius groaning.

"Are you trying to overwork me, Owl Lady?" Darius clips, Alador walking around next to Raine and grabbing a piece of whatever they're making, coming over to the table and sitting next to

Amity on the bench, facing out.

“Good morning, mittens,” He greets Amity, rubbing her shoulder.

“Morning, Dad,” Amity smiles over at him, Hunter looking up when Darius walks over to where they’re sitting, taking the piece of food Alador picked up and popping it in Darius’ mouth, Amity furrowing her brow at the scene. Alador just laughs, looking up at Darius.

“You could’ve gotten your own piece, you know,” He flatly points out, Darius just smiling.

“Well yours was right there, too tempting,” He nudges him, Amity turning to look at Willow agape. Willow just looks away and laughs. Alador kicks at Darius, Darius stepping back and looking at him incredulously. “Careful with the goods, Alador.”

“No, that’s it, I’ll have breakfast later,” Alador gets up, shouldering Darius on his way out, who just laughs, looking at Hunter and very casually asking.

“How are you feeling today, little puzzle-solver? Did you figure out that cube yet?”

Hunter blushes at the stupid way Darius addresses him, shaking his head, “No, and I’m feeling better. And also stop calling me those names!”

“Good to hear, your little palisman, too?” He questions, completely ignoring what Hunter just said. Hunter sighs and nods, admitting his defeat on that front.

“Mhm, him too,” He affirms, Darius just smiling and waving.

“Well, I hope you figure that out, but I need to go chase down wherever Alador went,” He tells him, “I’ll see you around, little *lovebird* .”

Hunter immediately puts his head down on the table, a blush spreading across his entire face knowing that Darius heard Eda say that earlier. He just hears Darius laugh and walk out of the room, Hunter looking up to see Amity staring at Willow with the same, shocked expression on, waiting for the door to the tower to shut at the end of the hall before she exclaims.

“Are they *together* ?!” She shakes her head, “Titan, my dad is with *Darius* ? What *was* that?”

“Calm down, the two of them are friends,” Eda calls back behind her at Amity.

“I do *not* do *that* with my friends, and neither does my dad! What is going on?” She puts a hand on her head, Hunter looking over *extremely* confused at Willow.

He leans over to her, whispering, “Why does she know that?”

Willow cups her hand around her mouth, putting it up to Hunter’s ear and whispering to him, “Darius was being very teasing with Amity’s dad, like taking food from him and calling himself like, like what he did. So that kind of implies they’re flirting, so Amity thinks they’re together.”

Hunter turns to her, just as confused, doing the same thing she did and whispering back, “But Darius is always like that.”

Willow just shrugs, both of them looking back as Amity cuts into their conversion.

“What are you two whispering about? I’m in *distress* ,” She emphasizes, Willow laughing.

“Come on, Amity, I think they’re just teasing!” Willow counters, “You know, like friends!”

“Friends? My dad used to complain about Darius *all the time* , how are they suddenly friends?”

“Boots, I don’t know what you saw but the two of them have been friends since school,” Eda tells her, “The two of them were at each other’s throats then, too, just the way they interact.”

“My dad? Standing up to *anyone* ? That’s ridiculous,” Amity shakes her head, laughing, “This is a horribly shocking revelation that I really hate but good for my dad for being happy.”

“You say that now, Amity, but trust me, two dads is *no* fun,” Willow tells her, all of them falling quiet when Luz walks into the room. Luz sits down next to Amity, Amity looking over and smiling at her girlfriend.

“Good morning, Luz,” She warmly greets, Luz giving her a very weak smile in return. Luz looks *exhausted,* eyes droopy and shoulders slumped.

“Morning,” Luz replies, Flapjack hopping over to sit right in front of her, looking up at her and tweeting wordlessly. “And you too, Flap,” She tells him, although she doesn’t move to pick him up or scratch him or anything. Flapjack hops up closer to her, pecking at her arm that is resting on the table. Luz pulls it away, looking at Flapjack confused. “What’s wrong? Why are you pecking at me?”

Flapjack hops backward a bit, looking up at Luz before hopping back over to Hunter with his head down. He presses himself right up to where Hunter is leaning against the table, nuzzling against him. Hunter pets him, looking down at him concerned. Flapjack looks up and very sadly tweets, *“Flapjack sad, no human girl.”*

“I’m sorry, buddy,” Hunter scratches him on the head, not elaborating anymore when he catches how Luz looks away from the two of them, folding her arms on the table and resting her head so it’s turned away. Amity just moves a bit closer and rubs her back, none of them saying anything. Clover comes buzzing into the room, flying and carrying Emmy in her little feet. She drops her safely onto the table before settling onto Willow’s head. Eda and Raine walk over a moment later with plates, Luz sitting up as they set them all out in front of everybody. Luz’s plate is particularly bland, but Hunter is pretty sure that’s because she can’t digest a lot here.

They all thank the two of them, Eda and Raine going back and grabbing plates for them and leaving, going somewhere else in the house to sit. They all start eating in silence, Gus trying to spark up a conversation at the very sullen table.

“So, Luz, did you see that I found glow-in-the-dark stars in Eda’s closet?” He asks, leaning around Amity to look at Luz, who only looks at him for a moment before shrugging and looking back down at her plate.

“That’s cool,” She unenthusiastically mutters, Hunter seeing Gus shrink back a bit. Hunter looks over to see Willow shoot Luz an upset look, which Luz looks up to see but ignores. Willow, instead, looks back at Gus and replies instead.

“Did you find anything else in there?” Willow asks, Gus smiling a bit as he begins to talk about the other things he saw in that closet. He’s clearly not as enthusiastic as normal, Hunter noticing Luz poke at her breakfast a bit before sighing, going to get up from the table. Amity grabs her arm, though.

“Hey, you didn’t really eat anything, you should have a little more,” She encourages her, stopping the conversation between Gus and Willow. Luz looks at her girlfriend a moment before sitting back down next to her, going back to poking at her plate. The table gets eerily silent, everyone just

eating quietly. Luz takes a couple more bites before she just gets up from the table again, this time Amity not stopping her. Luz walks out of the room without saying anything, Amity pushes her plate off to the side and buries her face in her hands, propping her elbows up on the table. Willow looks between Hunter and Gus for a moment before asking her.

“Amity, are you ok?” Willow reaches a hand out, putting it facing up halfway between her and Amity. Amity drops her arms, crossing them in front of her on the table. Hunter can see how tight her expression is, her eyes glossy.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” She brushes her off, Willow looking at her skeptically.

“It’s ok if you’re not,” Willow presses, “I mean, Luz has been really dismissive for a while, it’s going to be a little draining.”

“It’s ok, really, everything is fine,” She tries to dismiss, although it’s very halfhearted, “It’s- It’s just hard, she’s having a hard time coping with everything and I’m just trying to be there for her the best I can be, but, but like…”

“She isn’t telling anyone anything,” Gus finishes for her, “She’s been like that for a couple of days, sad and with a really short temper. I mean, she yelled at Hunter yesterday, right, Hunter?”

Hunter, although he really doesn’t want to rehash this, nods. “Yeah, she snapped at me about holding Flapjack yesterday, and then brushed him off again today. It felt like she couldn’t even look at me yesterday, she had her back to me and everything.”

“Yeah, she was *really* weird downstairs yesterday,” Gus agrees, “She didn’t even say anything to anyone.”

“And she lied about not knowing how to solve that cube,” Willow chips in.

“I don’t know, it’s just like- like this isn’t the Luz we know,” Gus sighs, “Even back in the Human Realm she wasn’t like this, at least not for this long.”

Willow nods, “Yeah, and of course, we’re all here to help her but she just won’t tell us anything. It hurts to see her like that but there’s only so much we can do without knowing.”

Hunter hears Amity sniffle, looking down as tears start to pool in her eyes. Willow immediately gets up and walks around the table, sitting next to Amity facing out, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Do you want to go walk outside for a bit?” Willow quietly offers, Amity nodding. The two of them get up, Willow putting a hand on Amity’s back. She starts audibly crying as they walk outside, trailed by Ghost and Clover, Willow quickly shutting the door behind them, leaving just Hunter and Gus at the table. They exchange mutually concerned looks, Gus being the first to break the silence.

“I hope that Luz starts feeling better or talking to us because I really don’t like seeing Amity like this,” He nervously glances up at the door, “It’s scary, I’ve never seen her cry before.”

“Yeah, I’m worried about her,” Hunter nods, picking up Flapjack and standing up from the table, “I’m also worried about Luz, I’m going to go talk to her, try to figure out what’s wrong.”

“I hope it goes well, I wish you luck,” Gus smiles at him, Hunter returning it before walking out of the kitchen and into the hallway. He slows down once he gets to the hallway, though, looking down at Flapjack in his hands. The last two times Luz has come in contact with Flapjack she’s shut down, and Hunter wants to *maybe* try talking to her without him. He’s definitely nervous to leave

him behind, but he also really wants to effectively get to Luz the best he can, and he thinks that's going to be without Flapjack.

He peers into the living room, seeing Raine and Eda sitting on the couch with one another, Raine sitting with their legs up on the coffee table, Eda leaning against the armrest with her legs laid over their's, her plate in her lap and their plate on her legs. She looks up when Hunter pokes his head in, Raine picking up their plate so she can swing her legs over to sit normally next to Raine instead, smiling at Hunter.

"Hey kid, are you guys done already?" She asks.

"Uhh, yeah, breakfast uhh, didn't last long," He hesitantly replies, Eda sighing.

"It didn't seem like it was going to," She replies, "Is everything ok, though, do you need something or are you just coming in here to sit?"

"I want to go talk to Luz, can you- can you watch Flapjack for me?" He nervously asks, preparing himself for a no. Eda just nods, holding out her hands.

"I'll keep him safe," She assures him, Hunter walking in and handing Flapjack off to Eda. Flapjack is *not* happy, though, very angrily tweeting.

"No! Hunter take Flapjack!" Flapjack demands, *"Flapjack see human girl."*

"You'll see her later, Flap, I promise," Hunter assures him, "Calm down."

"No! No! Now!" Flapjack hops up and down, *"No! Hunter take Flapjack!"*

"Flapjack, come here, buddy," Hunter holds his hands back out, Flapjack coming back to Hunter's hands. Hunter holds him up to eye level, very calmly telling him, "I'll be right back, I need to talk to Luz and I want to do it alone. Right after we talk I'll come get you and you can go visit her, ok? I promise."

"Promise?" Flapjack asks, Hunter smiling.

"Promise," Hunter assures him, holding up his pinky finger. Flapjack grabs it with his beak, Hunter carefully shaking it before Flapjack lets go, Hunter handing back Flapjack to Eda, who is beaming at him.

"Kid, you are adorable," She comments, Hunter blushing at the surprise compliment. Flapjack hops up and down again, happy this time.

"Hunter adorable!"

Hunter puts his head in his hand, groaning before looking up at Eda and telling her, "You taught him a new word."

"I taught him adorable?" She questions, Hunter nodding. She laughs, looking down at Flapjack and telling him, "I'm going to teach you so much, little guy."

"I don't want to know," Hunter shakes his head, walking out of the room.

"Good luck, kid!" Eda yells down the hallway as Hunter goes up the stairs. He gets to Luz's door, staring at it and taking a deep breath before knocking. No one answers the first time, so he knocks again, calling inside this time.

“Luz? It’s Hunter.”

***

Luz looks up from the book she’s been trying to distract herself with when someone knocks on the door. It takes her a moment to process it, but by the time she does they knock a second time, speaking this time.

“Luz? It’s Hunter,” Hunter calls inside, pausing a moment before continuing, “I want to talk to you, can I come in?”

Luz contemplates it for a minute, *really* wanting to avoid Hunter but knowing that she is only going to do more harm than good doing that. So, against her better judgment, she calls back, “It’s open.”

The door opens, Hunter poking his head in, the scars all over his face making Luz’s stomach angrily twist. She shifts uncomfortably to try to relieve it as Hunter walks inside, shutting the door behind himself. He sits down in front of her, smiling at her and fiddling with his hands in his lap for a moment. She notes he’s without Flapjack, which really concerns her considering they’re never apart. She doesn’t get the chance to ask, though, because Hunter talks first in a very even and clearly rehearsed tone of voice.

“So, I don’t know what happened yesterday, but I want you to know that I’m not mad at you for snapping at me. I know you were probably just overwhelmed because I was asking too much and I’m sorry that I did that,” He tells her, taking a deep breath before continuing, “But I know that there’s something going on that’s deeper than just what happened yesterday and I really just- I just want to talk to you about it because you’re always there to talk to me and I want to be the- do the- I want that for you, too.” He cringes at what he said, muttering, “That wasn’t how I wanted to say that.”

Luz analyzes him a minute before she nods, quietly telling him, “I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“It’s ok, really, I’m over it. It startled me a bit but a lot of things do that, it’s not a hard thing to do by accident,” Hunter assures her, “I’m more worried about you, Luz, I want to make sure you’re doing ok.”

Luz looks down and just shrugs, her head swimming with all the reasons she can’t tell Hunter about the things that have been bothering her. She’s caused so many problems already, the last thing she needs to do is make herself more of a burden for him. On top of that, she can tell by just looking at him that he still doesn’t feel great, considering how deep his eye bags are and how pale he is, paired with how tender his scars look. He’s smiling anyway, though, a genuine one. Where she can see the gap in his teeth peeking out between his lips, and how they’re brought up in an awkward, uneven way. *So* characteristically Hunter, and so genuine and caring that she closes her book, pushing it away and bringing her knees up to her chest. “I don’t know,” She whispers, Hunter moving to sit next to her instead.

“I’m listening, whenever you are ready to talk about it,” He tells her, Luz looking over at him and nodding. She looks back down at her feet, lining up everything in her head that’s wrong with her. All the guilt, the loneliness, the helplessness, the crushing feeling whenever any of it comes to mind. She then tucks it all away, telling herself that she really can’t dump all of that on Hunter, he won’t know what to do about it and he doesn’t deserve it. So, she resigns herself to letting go of

just a little bit of all of that, just enough to hopefully get back on her feet again.

“I just- I don’t know, I feel really bad about what happened back in the Human Realm. I- I ran off with you without getting anyone, I encouraged you to steal the rebus, I thought that I could take on everything going on by myself and it wasn’t fair to you because you and Flapjack got hurt because of what I did,” She tells him, wrapping her arms around her legs as her words start to escape her, “I didn’t think about it. I- I didn’t think about anything, I *never* think about anything and it always just blows up in my face and I cause such an issue for everyone and all of it is all my fault and now I’m stuck here in this rut and I can’t get any better or make myself happy and- and- and,” She spirals way further than she wanted to, tears starting to run down her cheeks, and she explains through hiccups, “And I didn’t want to tell you any of that!”

“Hey, Luz, take a deep breath,” Hunter advises her, moving a bit closer, “It’s ok, it’s ok, I’m listening to everything you’re saying.”

“I didn’t want you to know all of that,” She starts sobbing, moving her legs to lay out in front of her, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Luz,” Hunter puts a hand on her shoulder, “I’m glad I know so I can help-”

“I don’t deserve the help, Hunter, I don’t deserve it. I’ve caused so many problems and I just deserve to sort it out myself,” She turns away from him, Hunter taking his hand away and sitting there for a minute before Hunter carefully grabs both shoulders and turns her back to facing him, sadly smiling at her.

“You don’t have to turn away from me, I want to look at you,” He tells her, Luz tilting her head a bit at the strange sentiment, “I’m not upset with you, and I don’t think that’s true. You do deserve help, Luz, you deserve to have someone be there for you and help you through everything because it is a lot. You’ve been through a lot of stuff and it’s not going to fix itself overnight, but it’s really not going to if you don’t tell anyone about it. Trust me, it’s not worth keeping the secrets, it’s not going to protect anyone.”

Luz nods, wiping her eyes and looking up at Hunter again, seeing him looking at her expectantly, seemingly waiting to see if what he said was right. Luz just shakes her head, telling him brokenly, “I don’t know why I can’t just understand that.”

“Just take it one thing at a time,” He advises her, “Right now, we can just talk about it, ok? You talk, I listen. All we have to do.”

Luz nods again, processing the fact that she’s already in this deep and needs to just commit to telling Hunter everything that’s been going on. She isn’t going to lie, either, it feels really good to put words to all the horrible, heavy things she’s been feeling. He hasn’t yelled at her or pushed her away or dismissed her yet, and she just rides on the hope that he won’t start now.

With a shaky deep breath, she starts explaining to him as calmly as she can, although her speech quickly becomes frantic as everything rushes to escape at once, “I- I don’t know, back in the Human Realm I struggled a lot with feeling like everything that happened here was my fault and, well, if I’m honest that’s been something I’ve felt my whole life but it comes and goes but after everything that happened with you and- and with Eda and King and everyone here it’s all my fault, Hunter, it’s my fault! I taught Phillip the last glyph that let him be Belos that let him get the Collector that let him cause the Day of Unity and that put us in the Human Realm and that separated everyone from their families and that got *you* hurt. I caused all of it! It’s all my fault and looking at you makes me feel so horribly and gut-wrenchingly guilty because you wouldn’t look like that if I hadn’t been so *stupid* and I’m sorry, Hunter, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Luz breaks down into sobs, Hunter putting his legs out in front of him so he can bring her into a hug. He hugs her tight, which, as weird as it is, she finds very nice. She doesn't want to squeeze him back, though, afraid that she'll hurt him more than she already has. She tries to force herself to stop crying, because *why* is she crying about something that she caused? Hunter, though, catches it really quickly.

"I'm not going anywhere," He assures her as he rubs her back, "You can cry, it's ok. It's not a bad thing."

Hearing him say something so off base yet so comforting just makes her let go, finally feeling herself relax and soak the shoulder of his shirt, grabbing the back of it and clinging onto him. Hunter is so important to her, and having him sit here and listen to her and not judge her at all puts an impressively large dent into everything she's feeling. She starts to feel almost empty, but empty in a good way, where she doesn't feel like there's something gripping her stomach, or physically pulling her away from her friends. It doesn't reverse what she's thinking but it silences the voices repeating them over and over to her, and so, when he starts quietly talking to her a minute later, she *actually* listens.

"I know that it's not the same, but I've done so many bad things to so many good people in my life. And it's hard, knowing that bad things happened because of you. But you also forget all the really awesome things that you've done for people. If it weren't for you my life would be horrible, not only would I have met one of the coolest humans I know- well, I only really know two and one of them isn't cool at all, so I guess that competition is scarce," He falters a bit, making Luz chuckle, "But not only would I have not met *you* , but I would've probably been way more hurt than I am right now. You saved my *life* Luz, and maybe you did cause all of this by accident, but then you helped save all of these people on *purpose* , and I think that matters a lot more than something you did by accident. It matters more to me, I know that."

Luz nods, letting go of him and sitting back, wiping her face but not saying anything. Hunter just smiles at her, continuing.

"I know I can't tell you about anyone else because I'm not them but I can tell you that I still care about you just as much as I did before, more, probably, because you saved Flapjack's life. And if Flapjack were here he would cut me off and tell you that you saved my life too. I know I can't just fix it, I wish I could, but I can be here for you. I can listen if you need it and try my best to assure you that you're still a really cool person and that causing things doesn't make them your fault. And, ok, that really didn't make any sense, but just- I don't think you're a bad person, that's what I want to tell you. And I miss hanging out with you, that too, and so does Flapjack. He threw a fit when I told him I was coming up here without you."

Luz can't stop herself from smiling at him, the weird, awkward faltering making her believe everything he said, because that was the most Hunter thing he could have done. It makes her miss him, too. And missing him makes her miss her friends, and her girlfriend, and Eda, and Raine, and *King* . It makes her miss feeling happy and bright like the last time she was here, filled with passion and wonder and everything. She misses how things were a lot, but seeing Hunter awkwardly smiling at her, trying to assure her that things will be ok, makes that feeling feel more normal. Less choking, less constricting. She is able to take a deep breath in, chuckling at him when he looks at her expectantly.

"You said everything right, Hunter," She tells him, relief washing over Hunter's face. "I- I really appreciate it. I don't know, things have just felt really bad and I've felt really bad and everything but, I don't know, it feels good to talk about it. And I know you won't accept it but I'm sorry for dumping that all on you."

“No, not accepting it,” He shakes his head.

“Yeah, figured,” Luz smiles, “But thank you for talking to me, really, I appreciate it a lot. It felt good to get all of that off my chest. I don’t- I don’t feel good but I feel better, and I think that’s a start.”

“Mhm, yeah, I’m glad,” Hunter nods, looking down and fiddling with his hands before looking up and asking her, “What were you doing?”

“Before this?” She questions, Hunter nodding. “Nothing, I just had my book out, I wasn’t reading it, though.”

“Do you want to hang out?” He questions, “I have to go downstairs and get Flapjack first because he was he was really upset and angry that I wasn’t going to bring him up to see you so I promised that I would get him right when I was done so he could say hi to you too, is that ok?”

“Mhm, yeah, that’s ok, and I would love to hang out. Just- up here, maybe.”

“Yeah, of course!” Hunter jumps to agree, beaming and getting up, “I’ll go get Flapjack.”

Luz nods as Hunter leaves the room, hearing him go down the hall and down the stairs. She just sits and waits, processing everything that just happened. Her brain still feels a little foggy, so it’s taking some time for everything that she talked about with Hunter to hit her. As it does, though, she just feels better knowing someone else understands why she feels the way she does. And, on top of that, he wants to spend time with her regardless of it, making Luz genuinely smile for the first time in a couple of days.

Hunter comes back up a minute later, Luz knowing he’s coming because she hears Flapjack loudly tweeting. Hunter walks into the room, Flapjack in his hands jumping up and down and chirping. Luz holds her hands out, Flapjack hopping right over to be in her hands.

“Hey buddy,” She holds him right up to his face, Flapjack nuzzling up to her face. She laughs, as he chirps at her, Hunter, still standing, translating for her.

“He said he missed you,” Hunter tells her, Flapjack tweeting some more and Hunter translating again, “He also told you about how I left him downstairs with Eda and he’s mad about it.”

“Oh buddy, I’m sorry,” She smiles, holding him in front of her, “He left you behind, didn’t he, little guy? That wasn’t nice of him.”

Flapjack nods and tweets again.

“Flapjack,” Hunter sighs, “I wish your mouth got sealed shut instead of your eye.”

Flapjack turns around and angrily tweets at him, Luz pulling Flapjack to her chest and looking at Hunter in dramatic shock.

“How dare you say that about him! He’s such an angel and can say no wrong!” Luz playfully exclaims, “Take that back!”

“If you could hear him, you would agree with me,” Hunter argues, looking back behind him before walking out of the room and grabbing something next to the door, pulling it back inside and holding out a box to her, “Did you see these?”

“What are they?” She asks, reaching out one hand to grab them from him. She looks inside the

box, seeing the glow-in-the-dark stars that she has in her room at home. She looks up at him confused, “Where did you get these? Eda said she didn’t have any when I asked, like, forever ago.”

“Gus found them in some closet this morning. He left them outside your door, he told you this morning,” Hunter reminds her, Luz cringing when she remembers that conversion. Hunter brushes right by it, though, “I can help you put them up on your ceiling if you want. That’s where those go, right?”

“Mhm, yeah, I have them on the bottom of my top bunk at home,” She nods, smiling. “If you want to help I’d love to put them up.”

“Yeah, let’s do it,” He affirms, shutting the door behind himself as he comes further into the room, sitting in front of her and watching as she sifts through the box. Luz pulls out the ball of wall putty in a small bag, Hunter looking at it confused. “What is that?”

“It’s for sticking it up to the ceiling,” She explains to him, handing Flapjack back to Hunter. He takes him, the two of them watching Luz as she takes out a star and reaches into the bag, pulling out a little bit of putty and putting it on the back of the plastic star. She stands up, looking at the ceiling before walking over and grabbing the chair in her room, putting it where she wants the star, and standing on it. She reaches up, pushing the star onto the wooden ceiling, waiting for a second to make sure it stays. When it does, she looks down at Hunter and Flapjack and smiles at them, pointing up, “See?”

“Woah, that’s cool,” He marvels, “Do it again.”

Luz repeats what she did last time, setting up another star before putting the chair in another spot in the room and putting a new one on the ceiling. Luz repeats this routine a couple of times, Hunter moving out of the way with Flapjack and just watching her work.

“Do you want help?” He asks, “I mean, I’m not *that* nimble right now but I can try.”

“No, I got it, don’t strain yourself too much,” She teases him, Hunter groaning.

“You sound like Darius,” He tells her, Luz shaking her head.

“No, no I don’t want that,” She denies, Hunter laughing before lighting up.

“Speaking of Darius, do you know what happened this morning before you came down?” He asks, Luz shaking her head as she gets down off the chair to grab another star. “Apparently, Amity thinks that Darius and Alador are dating now? They came into the kitchen and were all teasing with each other and stuff, but that’s just how Darius is, you know? I didn’t see it, Willow explained it to me but it didn’t make any sense. They just seemed like friends.”

Luz laughs. “I’ll have to talk to Amity about… that,” Her sentence falls off at the end, Luz stopping what she’s doing as she realizes that she has *not* fixed things with everyone. She sighs, sitting down on the chair she was about to get up onto when she starts feeling heavy again. Hunter looks at her concerned.

“Are you ok?” Hunter asks.

“I still haven’t talked to anyone else about what’s going on with me yet,” Luz quietly admits.

“So just talk to them,” Hunter answers, clearly not understanding the problem.

“I mean, I can’t just talk to them,” Luz sighs, “I just- I just can’t!”

“Why?” He puzzles, Luz opening her mouth to argue with him but being at a loss for an answer, nothing coming to her.

“Oh, uh,” She replies, “I don’t know why.”

“Just tell them what you told me,” Hunter tells her, “About how you’re feeling, apologize for brushing them off, and let them do the rest. That makes sense to me.”

Luz nods, smiling and getting back up, “What would I do without you, Hunter?”

“Be sad still, probably,” Hunter shrugs, “We work well like that.”

“I make you no longer a bad but sad boy and *you* make me share my feelings,” She smiles as she sticks another star up onto the ceiling.

“Where did you get that from?” He groans, “I don’t get it at all. Bad but sad? Why is it assumed that bad people are not sad?”

“Not bad like evil, bad like- like bad! Like sick, and mysterious, and powerful,” She animatedly describes as she grabs another star, “You know what I mean, right?”

“No, not at all, I’m none of those things,” Hunter denies, “I’m not sick, I’m just fine, I don’t have any mysteries, and I’m powerless. None of that fits those requirements for being bad! Sad, ok, I’ll give that to you then, but not bad. That makes no sense.”

“You’re *so* literal, Hunter,” She jokingly groans.

“I don’t get it,” Hunter shakes his head, “I think I take things the way they *are* .”

“And I *love* it about you,” She playfully draws out, “Just my favorite part.”

“Ok, I’m not that stupid,” Hunter laughs, “You’re being mean to me!”

“I’m not being mean, I’m *teasing* you, someone has to do it,” She says.

“Flapjack has it covered, *trust* me,” Hunter assures her, Luz laughing.

“Like how he teased you about Willow *right* in front of the Bat Queen?”

“Ugh! Luz!” He exclaims, putting his head in his one free hand.

“When are you two just going to *date* ?” Luz asks him, Hunter looking at her confused.

“What do you mean? We’re totally *not* like that at all!” He argues, “We’re just friends.”

“Mhm, yeah, *just* friends,” Luz rolls her eyes, “Friends who *hug* and *cuddle* and sleep in the same sleeping bag-”

“ *On* the same sleeping bag, not in,” Hunter corrects her.

“Ok, blah blah blah, whatever, same thing! You two are *so* meant for each other,” Luz argues, sitting down on the chair and smiling at him teasingly, “One day, you’ll see.”

“I don’t even like her like that-”

“Lie,” She stops him, “You like her so much Hunter, admit it!”

Flapjack jumps up and down in his hands, tweeting something at him, to which Hunter puts a hand up to him.

“You’re the one who should be getting blah blah blahed,” He clips back at him, Luz walking over and scooping Flapjack away from Hunter, setting him in her hands instead.

“He is not nice, is he?” She asks, Flapjack shaking his head, “Yeah, the only person *he* is nice to is his *crush* .”

“Luz!” Hunter buries his head in his hands, Luz looking up to see his *ears twitching* . That’s something *Amity* does around Luz.

“You are head over *heels* for her, aren’t you?” She brightly questions, “Your ears are twitching.”

“Are not,” He puts his hands over his ears, revealing how red his face is.

“Are too!”

“Are not!”

“Are too!”

Flapjack tweets something, Hunter clipping back, “No, you don’t get to argue.”

“He absolutely gets to argue, he knows you better than *anyone* ,” Luz tells him, Hunter groaning and putting his head in his hands again. Luz moves to sit down on the ground, leaning down to look at him through his fingers, Hunter picking his head up a bit to look at her, clearly flustered. “And you know, if you ever decide to go for it,” She pauses, contemplating how serious her next sentence is before cheesily smiling, “I think you’d make a cute couple.”

“Luz!” He exclaims, Luz laughing and shaking her head.

“Ok, ok, but I also think that you’d be good for her. She used to talk about you *all* the time, you know. How you texted and talked and how nice you were to her even though you were the literal head of the Emperor’s Coven. She deserves someone like you,” Luz smiles at him, Hunter sheepishly smiling back.

“Thanks, Luz,” He replies, pausing a second before telling her, “I don’t know, it’s all really new and things are crazy right now and I just- I’m not the best at understanding how I feel and I’m *just* recently realizing that I really do like her and she’s *way* too good for me and I don’t really know what to do with it or how to deal with everything or what to do half the time.”

“She is not way too good for you, you are equally good for one another,” Luz assures him, “And it’s ok! Take your time, the time will come when you’re ready and that’s when you can talk to her about it. If you’re comfortable with where you are right now, just leave it. It’s ok to be happy as close friends, and friendship doesn’t have to look the same for everyone. You can be friends and still do all the stuff you guys do, don’t feel like you need to rush anything.”

Hunter nods, “Yeah, yeah, I don’t want to rush it. I like where everything is right now between us, and I don’t want to change it yet.”

“Mhm! And one day you’ll be ready, and then I get to openly express how much I ship you two,” Luz enthusiastically replies, Hunter laughing.

“I have no idea what you’re saying,” He tells her, smiling.

“It’s ok, you’ll understand one day!” Luz brightly replies, moving over next to Hunter and putting Flapjack in her left hand so she can hold up her right Hunter. “And I know you hug Willow all the time because she’s *special* but can *I* have a hug please?”

Hunter laughs but leans over and gives her a hug, Luz reciprocating it with her one free arm. Compared to her hug earlier, she feels this one *so* much more. It doesn’t feel like there’s any barrier of stress there. Just her and Hunter, and Flapjack hopping in her other hand too. Luz brings her hand over to where Hunter and Luz are hugging, Flapjack nuzzling against Hunter’s face closest to him.

They pull back after a moment, Luz looking at Hunter for a second. He looks the same as he did when he walked in earlier, same scars, same pale face, same huge eye bags, but for some reason he just makes Luz feel different. He brings her relief, a sense of peace knowing he’s ok, he cares about her, and he’s here for her. That support, no matter how small it is when thinking about *everything* she’s been dealing with, means a lot to her. And it’s why she doesn’t have any urge to brush him off and dismiss him, instead wanting to pick his brain for more valuable gossip.

“So, Eda and Raine, what’s going on with them?” She asks him, “What have you been seeing recently?”

“They’re so touchy, like, really really touchy,” Hunter tells her, launching into an explanation of how he went into their room and saw them sitting together and what they were doing this morning. She just intently listens, glad to be invested in something other than her own thoughts. Not only that, but she’s glad Hunter came to talk to her because she really needed to hear him tell her he was ok.

So now she can enjoy *all* the valuable information he’s been gathering for the couple of days they haven’t been talking for.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Chapter Notes

> my bad finals crept up on me and my attention has been split 8 ways but great news is i have so many good ideas for this au it's fantastic
>
> cw: discussions of depression, mention of suicidal thoughts

Hunter looks up when Dell and Mrs. Noceda walk into the living room where he's sitting, Dell comes up to sit next to him, a yellow cardinal perched on his shoulder. Eda told Hunter when he came downstairs that Dell waited until Hunter was done talking to Luz to come check on Flapjack, which Hunter appreciates because he was having a good time. Luz did tell him she was all done hanging out after a while, which he completely understands. Sometimes you just want to be alone, he can completely respect that.

Mrs. Noceda sits down on the loveseat as Dell looks at Hunter, telling him, "I'm just here to check up on him, make sure everything is healing alright. Can I see him, please? Just really quick?"

Hunter hands over Flapjack to him, watching as Dell turns him around in his hands and examines the new wing. He smiles at it, running a shaky finger across the top before handing him back to Hunter.

"He looks just fine, his wing is taking really well," Dell pats Hunter's shoulder, "You're taking good care of him, Hunter, he's healing great."

Hunter just smiles at him, looking down at Flapjack tweeting to Dell, *"Flapjack thanks!"*

"He said thank you," Hunter translates, Dell laughing.

"You have a very chatty bird there, Hunter, I've never seen anything like it," Dell tells him, "He is very special, I don't know if I told you that before, maybe I did, I don't remember. But I've made and helped a lot of palismen in my day and I've never met one as expressive as yours. Oh, and," Dell reaches up and holds a finger up to his shoulder where the yellow bird is, letting it move over to his finger and showing Hunter, "I brought down my cardinal for you to meet, he looks an awful lot like yours. This is Sunny, my palisman."

Hunter looks at the little, scowling yellow bird, completely dumbfounded that his name is Sunny. Flapjack jumps up and down, Hunter lifting him up so he can look at the bird too.

Dell chuckles, "Yeah, I know, he looks intimidating, but he's really sweet. They just look very similar, which is odd because I've only ever made one cardinal palisman and it's him. It's not unheard of, though, sometimes parallels through time have been known to motivate two unrelated carvers to make very similar palismen. Just a coincidence is all, I thought it was interesting."

"Yeah," Hunter nods, enthralled by the subject, "Really interesting, how does that even work?"

"Palisman carving is a very connected experience, it's connected to the Isles' magic, the wood, yourself. And all of it works together to guide you through making the right thing at the right time for the right person, very rarely do we choose what to carve. Like Flapjack's new wing, for

example, when Edalyn carved it she had to be in touch with everything around her to know when the wing was even. And since she has had a lot of experience with it so she carved a very good wing for him," He explains, "Anyway, because of that, sometimes carvers are struck with the same inspiration for palismen just because there's something tying those two experiences together. Some people will tell you it's the Titan's will, I think that's all junk. Really, it's just the basic theory of wild magic, that magic is everywhere and influences everyone always. So, naturally, if two people are wrapped in the same experiences, magic will influence who their palisman will be in the same way. Sometimes they're carved from the same tree, or in the same spot, or to someone related, who knows. But normally it's very coincidental, and I just find it funny that *you* have Sunny's identical twin."

Hunter enthusiastically nods again, hanging on every word Dell is saying right now. He's read a lot on palismen, but things like this are never in books. This is all carver's knowledge, and Hunter wants to know every last bit of it. It's unfortunately cut off, though, when someone yells down the hallway.

"Dell!" Hunter hears someone call, a woman's voice that's awfully familiar, "Come on! We're waiting on you!"

Dell sighs, looking over at Hunter and putting Sunny back on his shoulder, "Sorry, that's my wife calling me. As much as I wish I could say no if I do she'll come out here and probably just annoy you. I'll have to catch you again soon, though, Hunter, I can tell you have a very keen interest in palismen and I have about 50 years of experience with them to tell you about."

Hunter smiles, "Yeah, I would love to hear it."

"Consider it a promise then, kid, I'll teach you what I know," He pats him on the knee before getting up, bidding goodbye to Mrs. Noceda on the loveseat before going back down the hallway. Hunter excitedly smiles at the thought that someone is going to teach him about palismen. He looks over after a moment, though, when Mrs. Noceda gets up from the loveseat and moves to sit next to Hunter, smiling at him.

"How are you feeling, Hunter?" she asks, "I'm glad to hear that your bird is doing ok, I came with Dell because I wanted to know how he was. It's good to hear he's healing up alright."

"Oh, yeah, I'm feeling ok," He nods, "And, yeah, Flapjack too, he's been good. He's been annoying me relentlessly so I know he's ok."

"Hunter mean," Flapjack chirps back, Hunter just rolling his eyes at the bird. Mrs. Noceda chuckles.

"So, wait, I'm new to this, but does he *actually* talk to you?" She asks, "Like, when he chirps, are there words or is it more like uh, like you're reading his mind?"

"Both?" Hunter hesitantly answers, "I mean, he chirps, I hear him chirping, but those chirps are translated into words, almost, in my head. So it's more like another language."

"Can it be learned?"

Hunter shakes his head, "No, that's why it's kind of more like mind reading because only I can understand what he's saying. So when I first met him, I just heard chirping, but as I got to know him better and opened myself up to the bond I started to understand what he was saying. The longer you're bonded to a palisman the more articulate they get."

“So how articulate is he?” She questions, pointing at Flapjack.

“Impressively so considering I just got him a few months ago, but still not very. He talks in very fragmented sentences, but he talks a lot anyway,” Hunter tells her, “He’s been getting better, though.”

“And he understands everyone?”

“Mhm,” Hunter nods, “You can talk to him and he’ll understand you completely.”

She looks down at Flapjack, hesitating before asking him, “Did it hurt when I had to cut off your wing, buddy? You were very still when I did it, I was very impressed.”

“Yes, Flapjack hurt” He nods, *“Flapjack strong!”*

“He said it hurt but he’s strong,” Hunter translates for her, Camila looking at him puzzled.

“What exactly did he say? Like, word for word?” She asks him before doubling back, “Wait, can I ask that or am I not allowed to?”

“Oh, you’re allowed to, yeah,” Hunter nods, “He just said ‘Yes, Flapjack hurt. Flapjack strong.’”

“Oh,” She smiles down at Flapjack, “That’s fascinating, birds don’t talk in the Human Realm, so this is new to me. He- doesn’t use any pronouns?”

Hunter shakes his head, “No, it’s one of the big things known about palismen speech. Palismen always use proper nouns when addressing people, at least, that’s what’s been documented. I mean, I don’t know about other palismen but what Flapjack does is he uses a lot of nicknames. He really only ever says my name and his.”

“What sort of nicknames?” She questions.

“Like, well, Luz is human girl, so you’re human mom because, you know, you’re her mom,” Hunter explains, “And Amity is purple hair because of her hair, and then Gus is smart boy because he skipped two grades and he’s really good at illusions, and then Willow is, uh, flower girl, you know, because she’s a plant witch.”

“Pretty girl!” Flapjack corrects him, Hunter ignoring him.

“Most of his names are just stuff about whoever it is, like Eda’s name is Owl Lady because that’s how I knew her when Flapjack came to me,” Hunter continues to tell her, “Everyone gets a nickname so he can talk about them endlessly.”

She chuckles, looking down at Flapjack fascinated, “I’ve never had a patient talk to me before, it’s really weird.”

“Flapjack thank human mom,” Flapjack chirps back, *“Flapjack thank for help old wing!”*

“Flapjack said thank you for helping take off his old wing,” Hunter tells her, Mrs. Noceda holding out her hands for Flapjack to jump into and holding him up to eye level and smiling at him.

“Thank you for being such a brave patient, Flapjack,” She tells him, Flapjack happily but wordlessly tweeting and hopping up and down. Mrs. Noceda looks at Hunter expectantly.

“He didn’t say anything, he just chirped. He does that sometimes,” Hunter answers, Mrs. Noceda nodding.

“Mmm, I see, he is still a bird,” She adds, looking back at him and scratching him on the head with one hand, which Flapjack happily leans into. “I don’t really understand palismen, Luz talks to me all the time about her egg but I just do not understand how *this* little guy came from a piece of blue wood. It just doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Hunter shrugs, “It’s just wild magic.”

“When you’ve gone your whole life not knowing it’s real, learning about it is really baffling,” She tells him, handing back Flapjack, “But even if I don’t understand it, I’m glad you’re ok, and I’m glad he is too.”

Hunter smiles at her, “Thank you, Mrs. Noceda.”

“ *Camila* , cariño,” She corrects him, “Really, I mean it when I tell you, just call me Camila.”

Hunter sits there for a second, mustering up the courage to address her like that before just taking the leap, replying to her, “Thank you, Camila.”

She beams back at him, patting his knee but not saying anything, and a moment later Eda steps into the doorway, looking at Hunter with a bit of concern in her expression.

“Kid, do you know where everyone went?” She asks, “No one is outside.”

Hunter slowly shakes his head, nerves kicking up in his chest, “No, I have no idea. I haven’t seen them.”

“Alright, ok, don’t panic yet, let me check with Luz,” Eda assures him, walking back off down the hallway and up the stairs. Camila’s hand moves to rub his knee comfortingly, both of them watching the doorway and waiting for Eda to come back.

She does after a minute, looking much more relieved. “They’re upstairs with Luz, no need to stress.”

Hunter relaxes, nodding, “That makes sense. She said she wanted to talk to them.”

“Oh yeah, how’d you talk with her go? Good?” Eda asks, leaning against the doorway.

Hunter nods, “Yeah, we talked about a lot of stuff. I- I don’t think she wants me telling you, though.”

“Mhm, I get it, I just wanted to know how it went, I don’t care what you talked about,” Eda smiles, “It’s good to hear she opened up to someone, though, she needed that. I didn’t know you two were that close.”

“We’re uh, we’re pretty close,” Hunter shrugs, Camila nudging him.

“You two are very close, what do you mean?” She chuckles, looking back to Eda, “They were together all the time in the Human Realm, always muttering some kind of gossip to each other. That or beating each other up.”

Eda laughs, “Luz not only befriended you but also made a brother out of you? She’s more charming than I thought.”

“Charming is a word for her,” Hunter hesitantly teases back, causing Eda to laugh again and walk into the room, sitting down on the loveseat.

“Did my dad come visit you?” She asks, shaking her head, “Sorry, wait, am I interrupting something? I didn’t even ask, that’s my bad.”

“Oh, no, you’re alright,” Camila assures her, “We were just chatting.”

“Good, so did he come here and talk to you?” She asks again, Hunter nodding.

“Mhm, yeah, and he told me about palismen and how ours were similar,” Hunter brightly explains, very excited to be talking about it again.

“Mmm, yeah, they are. I don’t know how I never made that connection,” She nods, “Now, I know I’m not him, but I have some of my own palismen facts myself.”

Hunter’s smile widens, eagerly looking at her for whatever she’s going to tell him next. He finds this *fascinating* , so when Eda starts talking to him, he hangs on her every word.

“So, way back in the day, I carved my little friend Owlbert…”

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Willow, Amity, Gus, and Luz stand there silent as they listen to Eda walk away from Luz’s door, Willow looking back at Luz once the footsteps disappear. Luz, having been cut off as she started to apologize, takes a deep breath before starting to talk again.

“Ok, sorry, uh, so,” She stumbles through her sentence, “Like I said, I- I wanted to apologize for what I’ve been acting like for, well, a while now. I just- I’ve been really struggling with feeling really guilty and everything and I feel like everything that happened here is my fault because it *is* because I taught Phillip the light glyph and that let him be Belos and let him cause the Day of Unity and all of that and I just didn’t want you guys to know that because I don’t want you to hate me for it. That’s why I’ve been not telling you guys anything, and I’m sorry.”

Amity, Gus, and Willow all look at one another, Willow unable to assess what either of them are feeling about it. Amity speaks first, though, telling Luz, “Thank you for telling us about everything that’s going on. I-I wish we could’ve known that sooner but I’m glad we get to hear about that now.”

“And we’re happy to listen to it,” Gus adds on, “We’re here for you, we’re always here for you.”

Willow nods and warmly smiles, although she keeps to herself, sitting back and watching what’s going on instead of jumping to say something. She agrees with both Amity and Gus, so there’s nothing she needs to say right now. She just wants to listen.

Luz gives them a small, still clearly sad smile. “Thank you, guys.”

“But, recently, what’s been going on? I mean, I get why, but what’s been happening?” Amity asks.

“I just- I- I’ve-” Luz sighs, standing there a minute and collecting herself before telling them, “I’ve had just- a really hard time doing everything. Getting up, sleeping, eating, talking, feeling, I don’t know, *happy* . You guys, you make me really happy, but I’ve just been, I don’t know, cut off from everything because I don’t know if I really deserve it. I just feel really guilty about everything and,” She stops, rubbing her arm before quietly admitting, “Sometimes I just feel like it would’ve

been easier for you guys if I hadn't ever existed or known any of you."

Willow is hit with a shock wave of anxiety, looking over at Amity on her left to see her looking at Willow, slightly wide eyed. She looks over to Gus to see him also looking at her for a good answer. Willow starts to panic, having *no* idea what to respond with. She just heard that her friend wishes she never existed, Willow doesn't know what to say to that. She pushes back the worry the best she can and looks back at Luz, seeing her beginning to look *really* worried. She just forces herself to start talking to avoid anything worse happening.

"Uh- Um- I uh- We-" Willow stammers, putting her hands behind her back, "We don't think that at all, we- we really don't think that about you. You deserve to feel happy and everything but- I don't know, I'm worried that you feel like you can't sleep and eat and things like that. Those are really bad thoughts and I don't know if we know how to deal with them. I- I think you need to talk to your mom about stuff like this."

"No, no," Luz shakes her head, "I can't talk to my mom about this. She- She won't understand."

"Why?" Willow questions, "Why won't she?"

"She- She's done it my whole life, she just tries to make me happy and push me into this box and I just- I don't want that. I love her, I really do, but she doesn't understand stuff like this. She'll just tell me that I need to think about it better or be happier, she means well, I don't know. I can't talk to her."

Willow stares at her slightly suspiciously for a moment, considering this sounds *very* out of character for Camila. She's sure that Luz has struggled with talking to her mom before, but the Camila Willow knows knew *exactly* how to deal with stuff like this in all of them, so she's not sure if Luz just took it wrong or if things have changed. Regardless, she takes her word for it, suggesting, "Ok, what about Eda?"

Luz immediately adamantly shakes her head. "No, no, I can't talk to Eda," She denies, "I-I just can't. She won't get it."

"But she can be there for you, she can listen-"

"But I don't want her to listen. I want *you* guys to listen," She looks around at them, "I don't want Eda, I want my friends."

"And you *have* us," Willow tries to assure her, "But we're not experienced enough to help you fix some of these really bad feelings. I don't want you getting sick or doing something or getting hurt or anything and I think you need to talk to someone more experienced than us."

"I- She can't help, she can't," Luz begins to get visibly frustrated, "And I'm not telling her it. I'm not comfortable with that, I'm comfortable with telling you guys. Why can't you just listen to me?"

"I am listening to you," Willow takes a step closer, trying to close the gap between them to get Luz to really hear what she's saying, "I'm listening to you and I understand that you're struggling with feeling comfortable telling her but you're not explaining *why* you can't talk to Eda so that I can help you talk through it. You've always talked to Eda, and she's still there for you."

"Because things *aren't* the same!" Luz snaps at her, "You don't get it."

Willow stares at her dumbfounded, Luz's expression remaining frustrated and clearly not realizing why what she said was *not* right. Willow shakes her head, "I don't *get it* ? Luz, what do you mean I don't get it? My *family* is gone, I don't know where they are, I don't know if they're ok or if

they're being mind controlled or hurt or *dead* . I'm living in some house in the woods with no idea when I'll get to see my dads again, I *know* that things aren't the same," She challenges her, "Eda is *here* , for you, to listen to you and help you through things. You don't need to feel bad that I don't have what you do but you can't tell me that I don't know that things have changed."

Luz just stares at her blankly, Willow feeling her hands begin to shake as previously dismissed panic grabs back at her chest with a vengeance. She shakes her head, shakily telling Luz.

"I'm sorry, I-I need some air. I'm sorry," She takes a couple of steps backward before quickly walking out of the room, shutting her door behind herself and going next door into her room, arms creeping around her stomach as she starts to hyperventilate. She stumbles over to sit down against the wall, whole body just going rigid as every ounce of her energy goes to her spiraling thoughts. Her head swirls with all the horrible thoughts of what happened to her dads, or all the horrible things that could happen to Luz. And that all fell on her, how to answer, what to say, how to treat her. That was *her* job and she talked herself into a corner and now she can't stop thinking about failing to protect all of the people in her life she swore to herself she'd protect. Thankfully, she doesn't have to stop herself, because a second later she hears her name.

"Willow! Willow," Gus comes into the room, walking over and sitting down in front of her, "Hey, it'll be ok, breathe with me, ok?"

Willow nods, Gus counting up and breathing in, Willow progressively slowing her breathing down to match his. It takes a minute, but finally, she is taking big, deep breaths, quieting all of the voices screaming in her head. Gus moves over to sit next to her, crossing his legs and looking up at Willow.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?" He hesitantly asks, Willow shaking her head.

"No, can we just leave it alone?" She requests, Gus smiling at her.

"Mhm, yeah, of course," He nods, "So, do you want to talk about something else or do you want to just be quiet for a bit?"

"We can talk about something else," She tells him, "What about the closet you went through while Amity and I were outside this morning, what was in it?"

Gus lights up, beginning to excitedly explain about the hallway closet full of human things Gus has been rummaging through all day. He tells her all about something called cornhole, some kind of human game he found the equipment for in there. Willow has *no* idea what a 'bean bag' is, but she listens and nods along anyway. It's just good to hear Gus so excited, it distracts her from all the really *not* exciting things going on right now.

There's really no way she could be that upset with Gus around, and she couldn't appreciate that enough.

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Luz huffs and crosses her arms when Gus rushes out calling Willow's name, looking at her girlfriend still standing there, looking a little lost. As the silence sinks in, so does what Willow said, Luz just crouching down to the ground and putting her hands behind her head. Amity immediately comes over and sits down next to her, Luz moving to sit down completely and look over as she

starts talking.

“Thank you for telling us about all of that. I- There’s nothing wrong with the stuff you’re struggling with, and I think Willow just needed a minute alone and she’s not mad or anything,” Amity hesitantly tells her, talking to Luz as if Luz is going to run if she says the wrong thing. It sends a twinge of discomfort up Luz’s spine, making her feel like some kind of animal in a cage at the zoo.

“Yeah, it’s fine, whatever,” Luz shrugs, Amity moving a bit closer.

“Willow isn’t mad forever, she’s probably not mad at all. It just got overwhelming for both of you I think, and I know that Willow is level-headed and won’t hold that against you,” Amity assures her, “And I’m proud of you, too, for telling us everything. I know it wasn’t easy but you did it anyway, I really appreciate it.”

Luz looks over at her, seeing how genuine her smile is, how nowhere in her expression displays any more hesitancy. It’s weird and contradicting, considering how she just sounded like she was scared of Luz. But just as fast as she processes that change, she understands that it just comes from a place of caring, of not wanting to say the wrong thing and just wanting Luz to feel happy and supported. It makes Luz crack the smallest smile, Amity just beaming back at her and going to wrap an arm around her, but stopping.

“Is this ok?” Amity asks, Luz nodding. The moment that Amity’s arm settles around Luz’s shoulders, Luz feels a warmness seem to envelop her whole body, relaxing the built-up tension everywhere inside of her. And for some reason unknown to her, she starts to tear up, looking over and putting her head against Amity’s shoulder. Amity pulls her into a hug, Luz clinging onto the back of her girlfriend’s shoulder as she starts sobbing. Everything that she’s been pushing back at for a couple of days, or more so a couple of months, comes crashing forward as the feeling of her girlfriend’s touch wraps her up so safely, physically surrounded by someone she loves and cares so much about. This is all she wanted, and as fantastic as it is, something about it is unsettling. She’s not sure if it’s the still untold stories of some of the stuff that’s been shackling Luz to her bed, or if it’s the memory of the group’s conversation just now, but something about it doesn’t let Luz lean in as much as she really wants to. And that competition, between how much she wants to be held by her girlfriend and enjoy it and her brain’s unwillingness to let that happen, just makes her cry harder.

“It’ll be ok,” Amity assures her, rubbing her back lightly, “Everything will be ok.”

Luz so badly wants to tell her that it won’t, that there’s *something* wrong with her that just makes her keep messing things up, but she *can’t* . She can’t get her body to listen to her and just sit back and tell Amity what’s been bothering her so much. She grabs onto Amity tighter, holding on in fear that one day she’s going to disappear and leave Luz behind because she can’t just get any part of her to *stop hiding* . Amity is going to get sick of it, Luz is sure of that, but for right now she wants to hold on before any of that happens.

Amity continues to whisper reassurances to her, although after a while Luz’s brain starts to tune them out, trying to get her to believe that everything she’s saying is wrong. Luz messed up so much for her, and now is making *her* poke and prod for any small sliver of what’s wrong so she can help, that isn’t *fair* . It doesn’t seem to matter to Amity, though, because she stays there with Luz while she cries, continuing to comfort her and assure her that everything will work out ok. After a while, Luz begins to believe it, even if it’s only a small part of her that does.

Luz’s tears start to calm down after a few minutes, and once she’s stopped frantically sobbing Amity puts her hands on Luz’s shoulder, pushing her back to look at her, putting a soft finger under

her chin and pushing it up to look at her.

“Hey, are you ok?” Amity asks, Luz giving her a small head shake, Amity’s finger still under her chin. “It’ll get better, I promise, ok? And I’m here for you, until then and after.”

Luz gives her a nod, Amity smiling and dropping the hand under her chin.

“Do you want me to get you some water?” She asks, brushing away a tear from Luz’s cheek, “Maybe some tissues too?”

Luz nods again, her girlfriend leaning over and giving her a kiss on the forehead before getting up and walking out of the room. Luz puts every ounce of effort into *not* letting herself spiral while Amity is gone, reminding herself that she’s coming back and she doesn’t hate her.

It works, too, because a couple of minutes later Amity comes back into the room, a box of tissues tucked under her arm, a glass of water in her hand. Amity grabs the tissues out from under her arm, Luz taking both of them from her so she can shut the door.

“Thank you,” Luz replies, Amity smiling at her as she walks over to sit down next to Luz.

“Of course, batata,” Amity leans over and gives her a kiss on the cheek, which is all wet with tears and snot, Luz wiping at it and chuckling.

“That’s gross,” She tells her, Amity laughing.

“Eh, I’ve been through grosser,” She jokes, Luz smiling. Amity wraps an arm around her as Luz takes a sip of water, Luz leaning against her girlfriend. Amity rubs her shoulder, Luz savoring the lightness between the two of them. After everything, it’s nice to just be able to laugh a bit with her, even if there’s a huge part of Luz that doesn’t feel like doing any laughing. Amity breaks through that horribly thick mental block.

After a minute of silence, Luz very quietly comments, “I need to talk to Willow.”

“Mhm,” Amity just hums, Luz looking over at her to see she’s visibly confused about what to say. Luz takes that pressure off of her, though, continuing.

“I totally didn’t think that she would take it like that. That’s- That’s not what I meant, I just meant- I don’t know, with me and Eda. That’s different. I know she doesn’t know where her dads are and everything and I didn’t mean to say it like that,” Luz sighs, “I should apologize to her, right?”

“Mhm, I think so, but maybe give her some space for a bit,” Amity advises, “Let both of you breathe, think about it, and then go to her when you’re ready. She’ll be there for you when you are.”

Luz nods, looking down into her lap at the hand fiddling with the glass of water. She hears movement from out in the hallway, hearing a voice she easily identifies as Hunter’s, not like his voice is that hard to discern, although she doesn’t hear what he’s saying. She doesn’t try to, either, figuring that it has nothing to do with her. She just stays quiet, soaking up Amity’s presence. And as positive as the soft moment of silence is, she can’t help but feel the overwhelming sourness of it.

That there’s nothing more she’s really worth for doing, anyway.

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Dinner is absolute *torture* .

Gus knew that it wasn't going to be pleasant, after what happened with Willow and Luz everyone has been very awkward all day, but Gus was hoping they could at least have a peaceful dinner. Of course, they couldn't, and instead, Willow and Luz have been avoiding looking at each other all dinner, Amity has been dead quiet, and Hunter has been awkwardly looking between everyone. Gus just pokes at his food, feeling *way* too uncomfortable to start up any conversations about anything. If he's honest, he doesn't really understand what is going on between them and *why* they can't just fix it. He hates seeing them argue, and he *really* hates being in the middle of it. He doesn't want to pick between them, either. He loves Luz, and he loves Willow, and he doesn't understand why that can't just be ok.

After they've been sitting there for almost ten excruciating minutes, Willow gets up from the table, Hunter looking up at her picking up her plate and walking away. He gets up almost immediately after, following her and putting his plate in the sink. After they both leave, so do Luz and Amity, no one saying *anything* to Gus. He's left sitting there alone, his half-eaten plate in front of him, feeling so overwhelmingly lonely without his friends getting along. He just gets up, too, cleaning off his plate and putting it in the sink before heading upstairs, the house almost completely silent.

The silence gets into his head as his feet carry him to the closet of human stuff he found, pulling the cord for the light on the ceiling and seeing his vision begin to flicker with blue-tinted images of places he's been before, Gus immediately shutting the door and sitting down, bringing his legs to his chest starting to breathe in and out slowly. He counts on his fingers as he does, the image of the dimly lit closet beginning to become more and more solid. Finally, he calms down enough to not have to worry about casting anything by accident, looking around at everything around him and deciding that he might as well look through some of this stuff while he's in here. It'll distract him a bit, too, which is something he needs to start doing before he thinks about it too much.

He sits down in front of a box of stuff, looking in to see a collection of random human things that don't seem to follow a theme. He begins to pick through them, finding some bean bags for the 'cornhole' game he saw earlier, putting those off to the side with the ones he found in the bag tied to the game. There are a few things in there he's never seen before, but for the most part, it's just stuff they considered garbage back in the Human Realm.

He's drawn out of his silent working trance when someone knocks on the door of the closet, Gus looking back to see the door opening and Hunter poking his head in.

"Hey, uh, can I come in?" He asks, Gus nodding.

"Yeah, sure," Gus agrees, Hunter coming into the room and shutting the door behind himself. He walks over and sits down right in front of Gus.

"Uh, Willow wanted me to let you know she's sorry for leaving dinner really abruptly without talking to you, it just got overwhelming," Hunter tells him, Gus humming in understanding.

"Mhm, yeah, it's fine, she knows I get it," Gus assures him, glad that Willow didn't completely forget about him. He isn't mad, either, he understands that sometimes things just get too much. Hunter doesn't say anything else for a minute, though, looking around before pointing at the box Gus has been looking through.

"Anything good in there?" Hunter asks, Gus shrugging.

“Eh, a couple of things, nothing that interesting,” Gus answers, Hunter looking at the pile of things he’s taken out to look at further.

He points at something, “What’s that?”

“A bean bag,” Gus picks it up, handing it to Hunter, “It’s for some human game called cornhole, I was telling Willow about it earlier.

Hunter toys with it, looking at it puzzled, “Why does it feel like that?”

“I guess this bag is full of beans?” Gus shrugs, taking the bean bag when Hunter holds it out. “But it doesn’t feel like the stuff Camila used to cook for us, these are just little tiny balls. I don’t understand it.”

“Maybe you could ask her,” Hunter suggests, “She probably knows about it, I think.”

“I don’t know, maybe,” Gus shrugs again, not really in the mood to go out and talk to Camila right now, as much as the concept of these strange bags interests him. Hunter furrows his brow at it, although he doesn’t press. Instead, they spend thirty seconds just sitting in silence, until Hunter finally breaks it.

“Did you find anything else?” He asks, Gus shaking his head.

“Not really, a couple of weird containers and some strange small chomping monster thing but other than that no,” Gus replies, Hunter staring at him a second before just asking.

“Are you ok?”

Gus is a little taken aback by the question, rushing to brush him off, “Yeah, yeah I’m ok. Why?”

“Oh, I uh- I just wanted to ask,” Hunter answers, “Just to make sure.”

“Mhm,” Gus nods, silence hanging between the two of them again. Gus knows that Willow didn’t want to tell Hunter about what happened today with Luz, and it’s therefore not Gus’ place to talk about it with Hunter until she’s ready to tell him. Gus would really like Hunter’s opinion on it, but it’s a lot to tell him without Willow’s permission. He settles for another day.

Hunter awkwardly looks around the room before picking up something off of a pile to his right, holding it up and asking, “What is this?”

Gus takes it from him, examining the small box he picked up, seeing a picture of the strange chompy alligator machine on the front. “This looks like the weird chompy thing I found, here,” Gus reaches back into the box in front of him, picking out what he found before and holding it up for Hunter to see. Hunter takes it, hesitantly turning it around in his hands.

“But, what are those for?” Hunter questions, Gus shrugging.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe they’re a weapon,” Hunter suggests, Gus chuckling. Hunter smiles, too, suggesting again, “Or maybe it’s some healing machine?”

Gus laughs, shaking his head, “I don’t think so.”

“I mean, you don’t know,” Hunter shrugs, examining the object further. He pulls the top and bottom apart, opening it up and looking inside it. He furrows his brow, “How do you get those in

there?"

"Uhh," Gus opens up the box he's holding, pulling out a long strip of curved silver pieces of metal. "I don't know, do we break them up?"

"And put them in the hole here?" Hunter asks, pointing at the hole in the silver piece on top of the machine. "No, I don't think that's right, they don't look like they'd go in. Does it open any other way?"

Gus shrugs, watching as Hunter tries to pull the top part of it apart, the silver part snapping apart from the top plastic piece. Hunter's face lights up, smiling at Gus.

"Look!" He exclaims, "Can you put them in here?"

Gus takes what he has in his hand and puts it into the machine, Hunter very carefully shutting it and pushing the chomping machine together. It spits out a little piece of metal, which Gus picks up. It's only one of the little pieces that were stuck together, now folded up so the two sides are curved up, the top staying flat. Hunter and Gus look at each other fascinated. Hunter goes to put his finger in between the top and the bottom, on top of the small silver square where the folded metal came out.

"No, no, Hunter," Gus stops him. "Definitely not a good idea."

"Oh," Hunter looks back down at where his finger is, "Yeah, maybe not."

They both look over when the door opens, Eda standing in the doorway. She goes to say something but stops, pointing at what Hunter has his finger in.

"What is that?" She asks, Hunter glancing at Gus before they both shrug. "What does it do?"

"Spit a little piece of metal out," Hunter tells her, taking out his finger and pushing it down, picking up the metal it pushes out and showing her, "See?"

"And you had your *finger* in it? Kid, we just put you back together," She laughs, "And speaking of, it's time for your potion, so just come downstairs whenever you're ready."

"Mhm, ok, thank you, Eda," He answers, Eda smiling before shutting the door and walking off. Hunter turns back to look at Gus. "Uh, I need to go uh, take that. But I can come back if you want."

Gus contemplates the offer, but a large part of him really wants to keep going through stuff alone. He loves hanging out with Hunter, but it's been a long day and he kind of just wants to wind down by himself. Hesitantly, he answers Hunter, "Uh, I kinda just want to be alone, if that's ok."

"Yeah, of course," Hunter smiles at him, "If you want someone to hang out with, though, I'll be downstairs. Well, until I go to bed, but you'll be there when I uh, do that."

"Thanks, Hunter," Gus returns a wide smile, really oddly comforted by the weird way Hunter always offers nice things. It sets Gus at ease, knowing that even if everyone is arguing, Hunter is completely unaffected. "Go drink your potion, though, so you don't start dying."

"I won't start dying," Hunter counters, getting up, "I'll just feel a little bad, but I won't die."

"Well don't let that happen, either," Gus teases, Hunter laughing before waving and walking out of the closet. Gus basks in the quiet of the closet, hearing Eda yell back up the stairs at Hunter, who just calls back that he's coming. Gus doesn't know when the two of them got that close, but it's

probably good for Hunter to have *some* kind of adult to rely on. It makes Gus frown, though, because he really misses *his* dad. And his bed, and his room, and all his human junk. He misses a lot of things, and the thought makes him tear up a bit. He just has to settle for what he has, though, going back to sorting through the box of human stuff Eda has accumulated. A part of him still kind of hopes that his dad will come through the door and tell him to do something he doesn't want to do, or tell him that he can't keep *all* the human stuff he finds. It doesn't happen, of course, but maybe one day it will.

And when it does, he is going to give him the biggest running hug he ever has.

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Raine comes into the room and walks up next to Eda standing at her mirror, tying her hair back to get ready for bed. She looks over at them and smiles, pulling her hair tighter and greeting, "Hey, what did Darius want?"

"Just to ask *again* when we're sitting down for a full debrief. I told him to relax, there's nothing we could do this instant to fix anything major," Raine replies, leaning back against the table next to the mirror, "But we agreed that we need to do it before the end of this week because it really is important we know what happened back in the Human Realm, and not just little bits and pieces."

"Yeah, I know, but something is going on with the kids today. Didn't you see them come down for dinner? They were all *dead* quiet, not even Gus was saying anything. That kid always has something to talk about, something happened with them when they talked to Luz."

"And you didn't get it out of any of them?" Raine questions, Eda shrugging.

"I didn't get the chance to grab any of them alone. Hunter was with Willow, Amity was with Luz, and Gus looked genuinely very sad, and the only time he *didn't* he was with Hunter. I think there's something happening there, I just don't know what-"

Eda is cut off by the creaking of their door, both Eda and Raine looking over to see Flapjack hopping inside, Hunter walking in after him.

"Flapjack!" He quietly scolds the bird as he picks him up, looking up at Raine and Eda embarrassed. "I'm sorry I bothered you, he- he just hopped away and-"

Flapjack angrily tweets at him, Eda knowing Hunter is lying and definitely *wanted* to come in here and Flapjack was just forcing him to do it. Eda chuckles, smiling at him, "It's ok, kid, don't worry. Actually, are you going to bed?"

Hunter scratches the back of his head and shrugs, "I mean, no?"

"No as in no you don't plan on it or no as in you want to but are saying no because I asked?" She asks, Hunter looking at her confused.

"Eda, that made no sense," Raine tells her, Eda laughing.

"Yeah it did, that made total sense," Eda dismisses them, "But really, are you planning on going to bed?"

“Not anytime soon,” Hunter hesitantly answers, “Why?”

“Because come in, shut the door, I want to ask you something,” She answers, Hunter immediately tensing up, “No one’s in trouble, I promise it’s nothing bad. Come on.”

Hunter shuts the door and walks over to where Eda and Raine are standing, Eda gesturing for him to follow her over to where they were sitting last night, Raine taking the cue and sitting with Hunter in between the two of them. Hunter looks at Eda nervously, but she just gives him a warming, slightly mischievous smile.

“So, you weren’t there, but you’re probably the best source we have right now, *what* is going on with your four friends? What did they talk about that made them so awkward?” She asks, Hunter relaxing as he sighs.

“Oh, that, yeah. I wish I could tell you, but I really don’t know. I talked to Willow about it but she said she didn’t want to talk about it at all. I went in to see Luz but she was just sitting with Amity, and she didn’t really offer me anything more than a wave and an ‘I’m ok’. Gus was upset about it, I know that, but he was just on his own for most of the afternoon. He spent his evening in the closet of human stuff he found, and I went in there to talk to him and all he did was tell me about some stuff. And, I don’t know, Gus is normally really animated and everything but he seemed down. So, oh yeah, you asked what was happening, I don’t know,” Hunter shrugs, “Luz talked to them just about like, why she’d been avoiding them and stuff, I don’t know what could have possibly gone that wrong. She talked to *me* about it and I didn’t find anything to be this mad at. Plus she wasn’t even talking for that long, I came upstairs when I saw Gus come down to get Willow water, and apparently it had already been five or ten minutes since they stopped talking. Willow seemed on edge then, too, I don’t know.”

“Mmm, that’s weird,” Eda hums, and although she *silently* contemplates the information, Raine ‘gossip’ Whispers doesn’t do that at all.

“Willow didn’t tell you anything?” They ask, “Don’t the two of you talk to each other all the time? She didn’t talk about it at all?”

“Yeah, I found that weird, normally she tells me everything,” Hunter agrees, “I didn’t push that much, though, I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable asking about it. She seemed a little angry, though, which is weird, I’ve always known Willow as a pretty level-headed person unless something really bad happens. She’s protective, but not like, in a spiteful way.”

“Maybe something happened with her and Luz?”

“They’re like best friends, that would be weird,” Hunter tells them, “I’ve never seen them argue before. I’ve never seen Luz argue with *anyone* , for that matter.”

“Eh, she’s a little bit hot-headed sometimes,” Eda chimes in, “I wouldn’t put it past her to snap by accident.”

“I mean, with Willow though?” Raine challenges, “I haven’t seen them that much but I’ve seen them enough to know they’re close.”

“Luz sometimes struggles with slowing down and thinking before she does things,” Eda replies, Raine laughing and lightly nudging Hunter.

“I can tell you where she got *that* habit from,” They loudly whisper to him, pointing over at Eda. Hunter chuckles, Eda rolling her eyes.

“Blah blah blah, whatever, in that case, she got her good looks from me too,” Eda brags, Hunter glancing back at Raine a second before surprisingly quipping back at Eda.

“Don’t ignore Camila like that,” He playfully pokes back, Eda laughing harder than she really should’ve. She just *didn’t* expect that to come out of his mouth. Raine laughs too.

“Titan, two of you?” Eda shakes her head, laughing.

“We *need* two of us,” Raine replies, “Just me the last two months your ego has gotten way out of whack.”

Eda rolls her eyes, “Alright, Rainestorm, whatever you say.”

“But ok, back to the original topic,” Raine redirects them, “We don’t know what’s going on with Luz and everyone?”

Hunter shakes his head, Eda replying, “No, Luz has a talent for doing that, and I love her for it. But I think whatever it is, it’s between Luz and Willow.”

“Definitely. Gus wouldn’t be sad otherwise,” Hunter agrees

“But what about Amity? I thought she and Willow were friends?” Raine asks, Hunter looking over at them.

“They’re friends, but Amity is Luz’s girlfriend first. Even if she agrees with Willow, she’s going to be there for Luz. It’s just the way she is from what I’ve seen,” Hunter tells them, “Maybe Willow will tell me tomorrow, I don’t know. I’ll have to just see.”

“I hope something happens because I don’t know how much I can tolerate a quiet house,” Eda rolls her eyes, yawning, “But I’m tired, it’s been another long day of hearing Darius distantly complain about me,” She gets up, reaching down ruffling Hunter’s hair, causing him to look back at her, smiling. “Do you want to sleep in here tonight? Your sleeping bag is somewhere over there,” She points to her right.

“Uh, I mean, if you don’t mind,” He hesitantly answers, looking between Eda and Raine, Eda just smiling at him.

“I don’t mind at all, Rainestorm?”

Raine shrugs, “It doesn’t bother me, you’re welcome to sleep in here whenever.”

Hunter looks between them and smiles, telling them both, “Thanks.”

“Course, kid,” Eda ruffles their hair even more, eliciting a laugh from Hunter. Raine gets up too, offering Hunter a hand to help him up off the ground. She glances as Raine walks over and grabs Hunter’s sleeping bag and pillow, bringing them over and setting them out for him. Eda looks at Hunter’s hand to see that Flapjack is curled up and completely asleep, pointing down at him, “I thought he was quiet.”

“Yeah, he fell asleep once he got what he wanted,” Hunter replies, “He’s a temperamental bird.”

“Your relationship with him will never not be fascinating to me,” She chuckles, seeing Raine look down at the sleeping bag puzzled before looking up.

“Hunter,” Raine starts, Hunter looking back, “When was the last time you guys slept in an actual

bed?"

"Uh," Hunter thinks about it, "Two? Two and a half months ago?"

Raine looks up at Eda, the two of them sharing a mutual 'we need to get these kids beds' look. Hunter looks between the two of them.

"Was that wrong?" He nervously asks, Eda patting his shoulder.

"No, no, kid, I just have a mission for me tomorrow," She tells him, Hunter looking at her confused. He looks back at Raine, Raine filling him in.

"She's probably going to go steal mattresses again from somewhere so Mason can build you guys beds, don't ask too many questions. Sometimes it's better *not* to know."

Hunter nods in understanding, "Ohhh, ok," He pauses a second before telling Eda, "I'm sure everyone else would love that but you don't have to do that for me, you've done enough."

"Kid," She sighs, laughing, "Accept that I care about you just as much as I care about everyone else."

Hunter sheepishly smiles, Eda beaming back at how *little* it takes to make him get all smiley like that. She lets the moment sit for a second before telling him.

"Although, we don't have that tonight, so the sleeping bag will have to do," She jokes, gesturing down to the sleeping bag.

"It's ok," He tells her, hesitating before almost blurting out, "Thank you, for, you know, caring about me? It's uh, nice."

Eda stares at him almost in shock for a second, not believing that he just thanked her for *caring* about him. It hits her, how he really has never been genuinely cared about before, and Eda, being who she is, is now *extremely* invested in making up for all of that. She shakes off the kind of sad thought, though, responding to him, "You don't need to thank me for *caring* about you, that's what I do. I'm always here for you, too, and don't forget it because if you do I'll make it a point to remind you of it so much you'll wish I wasn't."

Hunter chuckles, Eda gesturing for him to come closer and pulling him into a hug. It doesn't last long, Hunter pulling away after a second, but Eda doesn't mind. It's baby steps, he's not Luz.

"Goodnight, kid," She ruffles his hair, Hunter smiling back at her.

"Goodnight," He turns around to Raine, awkwardly telling them, "Goodnight to… to you… too."

Raine just laughs, smiling, "Goodnight, Hunter."

Raine walks over to their side of the bed, Eda doing the same. Hunter settles down into his sleeping bag, Eda leaning over when she lays in bed to see him setting down Flapjack on his chest, Flapjack stirring and chirping something at him. Hunter just whispers goodnight to him, Eda turning to look at Raine laying down next to her, having taken their glasses off. The two lay on their sides, right in front of one another, Eda smiling at them.

"Rainestorm, I hope you know we have a kid now," She whispers, "You can't go anywhere."

"Well that's good because I wasn't planning on it," They tell her, Eda quietly laughing, although

the comment makes her blush. At that moment, *so* much of her just wants to lean forward and kiss them. The feeling is almost overwhelming, but she holds herself back from it. Not right now, it's not the time at all. Things are so weird and unpredictable and they have *so* much they need to talk about before then. Whatever they have right now, whatever this is, it's working, and although Eda wants to finally have them back after almost 30 years, a few months of waiting is worth nothing when compared to a healthy, happy relationship with them. It's all she wants, and realistically, all she's ever wanted from the moment they broke up with her.

But she doesn't jump the gun, instead just moving closer and tucking her head under their chin, Raine running a hand through her hair on the top of her head, careful not to pull at her ponytail. "Goodnight, Eda."

"Night, Rainestorm," She answers, although she doesn't close her eyes just yet. Something in her just aches, keeping her eyes open, staring at their shirt in the darkness. She hates nights like these, where she just feels *so* close to what she wants yet so indescribably far from it. What she wants is right there, but she just can't take it. Instead, she's stuck in this weird situation where she has no idea what Raine feels about it, no idea if this will go anywhere after everything blows over, and no idea if she's just a warm body to bring them comfort when they're cooped up here with her. Nothing is worth mulling over now though, she tells herself, it'll all need to be answered after this is all over.

For now, she'll just enjoy what she has with them, and hope that this isn't the most things will ever be.

Burying the Past

Chapter Notes

this chapter is long but i wanted this all to fit together so you are welcome!!!

Amity scratches Ghost's head, who is sprawled out on the bench next to her. The table is completely silent, Luz to Amity's left just sitting there and toying with her hands, Gus next to her doing the same. Willow and Hunter were talking when Amity and Luz came downstairs, but the conversation died pretty quickly. Now it's just quiet, even Flapjack is just sitting on the table silently.

She looks back in surprise when she hears Darius' voice coming from down the hall, not-so-quietly telling someone, "Just go- Go! She's your daughter, what do you mean you're- Fine then, Alador I'll do it-"

He's cut off by quick footsteps down the hall, Amity's dad appearing in the doorway right after, Eda looking up from where she and Raine are finishing making breakfast.

"Good morning, Alador, you look like you've been chased," She idly comments, Amity's dad just ignoring her, looking right at Amity.

"Hey, mittens," He greets, oddly very nervous, "Are you uh, doing something?"

"No?" Share replies, confused, "Why?"

"I just wanted to know if you want to have breakfast with me," He asks, Amity looking back at the silent table before nodding.

"Yeah, sure, I'll eat breakfast with you," She agrees, looking back over at Luz and telling her, "I'll be back."

"Mhm," Luz hums, nodding. Amity doesn't miss the slightly upset look on her face, but she just hopes that Luz understands that this is her dad, she really can't say no. Plus Amity knows Luz wants to talk to Willow this morning, so she's sure it's not that big of a deal. Amity gets up, Ghost waking up and following after her, Eda holding out a plate with her right, abomination hand over where her left is pushing around griffin eggs in a pan. However, her hand shakes pretty badly, and she has to drop the spatula she's using to grab the plate with her left hand too. Raine immediately stops what they're doing and picks up the griffin egg scrambling for her, Amity's dad looking extremely concerned.

"Has it been shaking badly recently?" He asks as he takes a plate, Eda using both hands to pick up the other plate of food she finished, handing it to Amity.

"It's been uh, it's been something," Eda replies, "I can't pick up stuff like that, plates and things where there's a lot of pressure. It's no big deal, though, it's ok."

"Hmm, no, that won't do," He shakes his head, "I'll see what I can think of to stabilize it more for now, I definitely can make a better one if I have my workshop. Has it been hurting?"

“Mmm, later, Alador,” She dismisses him, Amity’s dad unsatisfyingly humming but agreeing.

“Alright, later,” He agrees, looking at Amity, “Come on, we can go eat in the tower.”

Amity nods, following her dad down the hallway and into the tower. He leads her up the spiral stairs going up it, heading into a room about halfway up. It’s small, only fitting one bed in the center and a little, closed closet set into the wall. It’s closed, although peeking out from behind the door trapped between the door and the wall is a light purple piece of fabric. Her dad sits on the bed, patting the spot next to him.

“Come sit, mittens. Sorry, we don’t get much more than beds in here,” He tells her, Amity coming over and sitting on the bed next to her dad, keeping a bit of distance between them. He’s a *very* awkward guy who would *never* ask her to sit and eat with him if there wasn’t a reason for it. She lets him lead the conversation, though, disappointed when he just asks, “So, how has your day been?”

“I just woke up, Dad, it’s morning,” She reminds him, her dad nodding.

“Right, right,” He looks back down at his plate, Amity letting the silence sit for a second before asking him.

“What did you want me for?”

Her dad looks up at her, sighing before admitting, “I want to talk to you about what happened the last time I saw you.”

“With the abomatons?” She questions, her dad shaking his head.

“No, no,” He pauses a second before continuing, “With your mother, and uh, quitting.”

She sighs, because of *course* her dad brings this up *this* early in the morning after the exhausting day she had yesterday. She’s already here, though, so she might as well hear him out. “Yeah, what about it?”

“So, well, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about what I plan on doing after all of this Collector stuff stops and- I’ve decided that I’m leaving your mom for good, whatever that entails. It’s- It’s going to be complicated, all of our money and my work and the house is all under her name but I know I can make it work, I’ll do what it takes to keep building things and making money so that you, Ed, Em, and I can all live as good as we can. It’ll take some work but, you know, I’ve been working nonstop for five years, I can take a little more of it,” He chuckles, Amity more confused than anything about the comment. Her dad shrinks back a bit when she doesn’t say anything, instead solemnly continuing, “And I know that you and your mom had a rocky relationship-”

“Rocky? Dad, I couldn’t *stand* mom. You were *there* when I said I was never speaking to her again,” She reminds him, “What about that says *rocky* ?”

“Amity, I just- I just didn’t want to assert anything-”

“You wouldn’t be worried about that if you paid *any* attention to me,” Amity counters, setting her plate aside to the left of her, “Then you would *know* I hate her and that I’ve been trying to do everything to spite her for months.”

He sighs, “I’m sorry, really, but just- I misspoke, I know you don’t like her. Let me finish, please.”

Amity hums but doesn’t interrupt him again, letting her dad continue talking.

“As I was saying, I know that you and your mom have a bad relationship, so I just wanted you to know that I’m going to do everything I can so you don’t have to see her again and can still have a home with me. I’ve- had a hard time being around, but I want to fix it, I really do,” He explains, “And I’ll talk about this again when we get Ed and Em back, but for now I want you to know my plan and know that I love you and care about you a lot, Amity, and I really want you in my life. The best thing that ever happened to me was having you and your siblings, and I feel like I let that go for a long time. I don’t want that anymore, I’m going to fix it when this is all over.”

Amity stares at her dad quizzically, trying to study how much of what he’s saying is actually genuine. Maybe it’s her natural mistrust that her parents really want the best for her, but something about everything he’s saying feels so *empty* . It’s really bothering her, and apparently Ghost, who has been laying at her feet, feels that too, because she jumps up on the bed to lay between Amity and her dad. Amity pets her, her dad looking down at the cat and smiling.

“Oh, your palisman followed us in here, I didn’t even see her,” He comments, scratching her on the head before looking up at Amity and asking, “What’s her name again?”

“Dad, *what* ?” Amity looks at him agape, completely sent over the edge by him asking such a *stupid* question he should know about her. “What do you mean ‘what’s her name’? You don’t know her name?”

“I’ve only met her a handful of times, I’m sorry, I don’t remember,” He apologizes, Amity huffing as her years of frustration bubble to the surface.

“You *never* remember, that’s your problem, you don’t know anything about me. You claim you’re going to craft some great life for us but do you even know who we are?” She aggressively questions, “Do you know what, I don’t know, my favorite book series is? Or what Ed’s bat is named? Or the name of the girl Em talked about all the time?”

Her dad looks down, clearly defeated, just letting Amity continue.

“You don’t know *anything* , you haven’t done more than wish me happy birthday on my birthday since I was 10, I haven’t gotten your time for years and I just have to believe that you care about me and everything?” She argues, standing up as she continues scolding her dad, “It’s going to take a lot more than that to convince me you’re not just going to leave Ed and Em to raise me again-”

“Amity,” Her dad firmly stops her, Amity’s expression going from angry to almost shocked that her dad was firm with her at all. “Sit down, please, calm down.”

Oddly, she listens to him, her dad getting up and taking both his plate and hers and putting them on the floor close to the nightstand so they don’t step on them before sitting back down where he was before. Ghost climbs into Amity’s lap, Amity running a mindless hand through her fur as she listens to her dad.

“There are a lot of things that you don’t know about your mom and me and how our relationship worked, and I understand you’re upset but *nothing* I *ever* missed was my choice,” He calmly tells her.

“Well then tell me these things,” Amity clips back, “If they’re so essential to understanding why you were never there.”

Her dad takes a deep breath, hesitating before asking her, “Are you sure you want me to talk about it?”

“Yes, absolutely, I want to know,” She demands, her dad nodding.

“Alright, I’ll tell you,” He concedes, pausing for a long moment before he begins to explain, a slight bit of shake in his voice that Amity doesn’t miss, “Your mom was, well, not very kind to me either. She used to force me to work all the time, every day, no exceptions. Do you remember when I got sick a while ago, with the fire flu?”

Amity nods, vaguely remembering her mom telling her that her dad was sick but not actually remembering seeing him sick at all.

“Well, I only got two days off to recover, and she forced me to come right back to work after that, and then I found out she fired half my team while I was gone. Of course, she just expected me to pick up the work they couldn’t do, and it only spiraled as demand got higher. I didn’t really recover from it until a couple of months ago when I started living here. She’d lock me in my workroom if deadlines got too close or customer demand got too high, she wasn’t a forgiving woman, Amity. I could have *never* asked to skip for something, birthdays and holidays included. I managed the free time I had poorly, I know, but I also didn’t have that much of it. I recognize I’m not close to you, and now that she’s out of the picture I want to fix that,” He explains to her, visibility irked by reliving the memory of it, “Your mom has been telling me what to do and when to do it for a very long time, and arguing with her about it only made her push me away from you further. So I just did what I could, because being able to see you and spend whatever time I could with you meant the most to me. It wasn’t good or easy, and I’ve had to agree to a lot of deals that I didn’t want just to keep you and Ed and Em from ending up like I am, but I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

Amity has lost all of her pent-up frustration, instead replacing it with a lump in the back of her throat hearing her dad *pour* his heart out to her. He tears up a bit but he keeps steady as he continues.

“It was a mistake for me not to tell you all of this sooner because one of my biggest fears with you and your siblings is you going on to be with someone who controls everything you do like I was. You all deserve *so* much more than that, and when you go off to do whatever amazing things you’re going to do, I don’t want you to make the same mistake I did, alright?” He requests, Amity nodding, lips pressed together tightly. He gives her a weak smile, clearly on the verge of tears, “Although, you already have Luz, so I don’t think I need to worry too much about you.”

Amity laughs, unable to stop as tears slip down her face. She’s at a complete loss for words, trying to grapple with everything her dad just told her about. It feels weird, knowing why he spent every day locked up in his workshop, not acknowledging any of them or bothering to spend any time chatting. He didn’t have a *choice* , and that thought of her dad’s really sad life hits her harder than she thought it ever could.

Her dad opens his arms to her, and this time, completely unlike a few months ago, she falls right against him, really surprised to find herself practically sobbing in her dad’s arms, something her from a few months ago wouldn’t have even *fathomed* . Realistically, her from a few *minutes* ago wouldn’t have thought this either. The only other time she did this was when she first saw him a few days ago and found out he was alive, but even that wasn’t this raw. This is just her and her dad, Amity sitting on the newfound realization that her dad was just as hurt by her mom as she was. He didn’t agree with anything she said, he just did it so that she kept Amity and her siblings safe, and although, with some selfish part deep inside her, Amity is mad that he couldn’t just leave and get them out of there. But the rational part of her understands that it’s not that easy, and knows that if it was he would have left a long time ago.

“I’m sorry, Ams, I’m sorry,” He apologizes, Amity smiling at the nickname she hasn’t heard in a

very long time. She can hear he's crying too when he continues, "Things are going to be better, I promise, ok? You just have to trust me."

"I trust you," She tells him, sitting back to see his eyes are all red, tears running down his cheeks but a huge smile on his face anyway.

"Thank you," He replies, reaching out and putting a hand on the back of her head, pulling her closer, and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. It's warm this time, not sour like the last time he did that, surrounded by abomatons telling her to run away. Amity moves in and gives him another hug, her dad just wrapping his arms back around her. The sweet moment barely lasts a minute, though, because someone knocks on the door and Amity sits back.

"Is Darius asleep in there?" Someone on the other side of the door asks, Amity staring at her dad appalled. He looks at her for a second before looking back.

"No, Hettie," He unenthusiastically calls back, Hettie sighing.

"Well, where is he?" She questions, Amity's dad sighing and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Why would I know that?"

"Why wouldn't you? You two are always-"

"Titan, Hettie, don't even say it. Go away, I'm busy," He dismisses her, Amity hearing Hettie huff but walk off. Her dad looks back at her with a slightly nervous expression, Amity cheekily smiling before asking him.

"You two are always what, Dad?" She teases, "Tell me, you're what?"

He smiles, sniffling and shaking his head as he wipes his face, "Alright, alright, we're just- we're just friends, close friends. We were, well, together in school and a lot of things got between that so we broke up and now we're just- we're just friends. Nothing more than that."

She looks at him skeptically, "Who sleep in the same bed?"

"We don't- Ok, well-" He sighs, hesitantly admitting to her, "Well maybe we're a little more than that."

Amity smiles at her dad, chuckling, "Why are you so weird about it, Dad? Good for you, go date Darius or whatever, I'm happy for you."

Her dad looks at her in surprise, "Really?"

"Yeah, really, I don't care. Anyone is better than mom," She assures him, her dad smiling. After a beat of silence goes by, she excitedly asks, "But does this mean he can teach me how to turn into an abomination?"

Her dad huffs, "Just because people tell you that's an essential part of mastering abomination magic doesn't mean they're right."

"No, but it's *so* cool," She counters, "You're just jealous because *you* can't do it."

"Hey, that is *not* true, I just know that there is so much to abominations, and turning into one doesn't have to be an end goal," He jokingly scolds before nodding, "And because I can't do it, yes."

“So Darius could teach me!” Amity presses, “Come on, please?”

“You can ask him about that,” He tells her, “If he says yes, he says yes, I don’t control that.”

“But you have an in.”

“I don’t ‘have an in’,” He quotes her.

“Yes you do, Dad, come on!” She encourages him, Her dad huffing but caving.

“Ok, fine, I’ll ask him about it,” He agrees, Amity smiling.

“Thank you!” She happily replies, her dad chuckling and smiling at her, a sight she *really* hasn’t seen in a while. Unexpectedly, though, her stomach growls, both of them laughing.

“Grab your plate, let’s go back to eating,” He tells her, Amity pushing Ghost off of her and getting up and grabbing the two plates on the ground, giving one to her dad and sitting down with hers. They eat pretty much in silence, Ghost going back in between them. It’s not uncomfortable though, rather just both of them agreeing that they have a lot to work through, but right now it’s just comfortable. She enjoys it, too, just being able to be close to him is enough for her after *years* of never being around him. It’s really refreshing too, after the couple of days she’s had, to tie off this end.

They don’t eat for very long, and once they finish her dad looks over at her, “Do you want to get back to your friends? You’re welcome to stay with me but I want to start drafting something for Eda’s arm, so I might not be the most engaging person to be around.”

“Oh, yeah maybe, I’ll go back and take your plate, too,” She offers, getting up and taking her dad’s plate, stacking it on hers and going towards the door. She stops when she gets there, thinking about what’s right to say to cap off this interaction but ultimately deciding on something that’s been nagging her since he asked it. She nods down to her feet, “This is Ghost, by the way.”

“Ghost, yes,” He nods, “I promise I won’t forget it.”

“But I can remind you if you do,” She assures him, putting the biggest smile on her dad’s face. After a beat of silence, she says, “Thank you for talking to me today, Dad.”

“And thank you for listening to me,” He replies, “I’m always around, Ams, now you know where to find me.”

“Yeah, and Darius too,” She jokes with him, her dad putting his head in his hands.

“Why did I tell you that?” He mumbles to himself, Amity laughing before opening the door and calling back.

“Bye Dad!”

Despite everything they talked about, she still finds herself beaming when she hears him pleasantly answer.

“I love you, Ams,” He says, Amity stopping in the doorway, contemplating it a minute before looking back over her shoulder and smiling.

“I love you too, Dad.”

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Willow looks back when someone grabs her shoulder, surprised to see Luz got up from breakfast when Willow left and came after her. Willow stops and turns around, confused as to what Luz wants, considering she's been completely avoiding Willow since yesterday.

"Can we uh, talk, if you have a minute?" Luz asks, Willow nodding.

"Yeah, I'm free," Willow nods, leading the two of them upstairs. Luz goes by Willow to bring them into Luz's room, probably because there isn't a chance of someone walking in, since Amity likely knows she's doing this. Willow shuts the door behind herself, watching as Luz looks around for a second before taking a deep breath and starting.

"So, I just- I want to say sorry, for what I said yesterday about not knowing things are different I-I know you know that. I'm sorry about everything, your dads and all of that. I feel really bad I said that to you because it just came out wrong and I'm sorry. I've been so wrapped up with myself and all the things I'm struggling with I didn't even think about you, I'm sorry, and I'm always here if you want to talk about it," She apologizes, seemingly very genuine. "I don't want to be like this anymore, I don't like it. I just want to be friends like normal again."

Willow nods, contemplating what she said before responding, "Thank you, yeah, me too. I'm just more worried about you, Luz, I'm really over what you said. I just want to make sure you're ok before anything."

Luz blankly stares at her for a moment, her expression unreadable. Whatever it is, Willow has *never* seen it before, Luz just sputters out after a minute, "I-I'm not- I don't need worry, really. I'm ok."

"What you said yesterday was worrying," Willow tries to calmly press, but Luz steps back like Willow is going to attack her.

"No, no, I *really* don't want to talk about this, Willow," She denies, "I don't need help, I'm fine, I just want you guys. I told you that, it hasn't changed. You don't need to tell anyone."

Willow looks at her confused, "I wasn't going to."

"Yeah, yeah of course, yeah you weren't," Luz nods, "But just- I just- I want you to listen to me."

"I'm listening but I want to make sure you're safe-"

"No, you're trying to dump me off on Eda," Luz counters, Willow completely confused at how they got here. Luz seems *scared* of her, something Willow really doesn't understand. There's something wrong, really wrong, but Willow can't place what it is.

"Luz, I haven't mentioned Eda at *all* ," Willow tells her, concerned, "What do you mean?"

"Yesterday, and now you're telling me again, you're just-" Luz takes a shaky deep breath in, face suddenly starting to twist with panic. Willow admittedly starts to panic too, having *no* clue where this came from. Something just set Luz off, and now Willow is desperately trying to think of what did this.

"Luz, stop, breathe," Willow advises her, although Luz just steps back again, silence hanging over them a second before Luz very quietly tells her.

“Can I be alone, please?”

“Are you sure?” Willow asks, “Do you want me to-”

“No, no, can I just be alone?” Luz asks again, a little more broken this time, “Really.”

Willow, at a loss for what else to do other than listen, nods. “Ok, uh, yeah,” She reluctantly agrees, “If you need anything I’ll be around, just- remember to breathe, ok?”

“Mhm,” Luz hums, turning away to face back toward her window. Willow takes that as her cue to leave, making sure to shut the door behind her quietly. She stands there for a second, taking a couple of deep breaths before going back downstairs, poking her head into the living room to see who she hears talking in there. Sitting on the armchair is Raine, and Eda is next to Hunter on the couch. Willow doesn’t know when Hunter got that close to the two of them, but it’s kind of cute to see him actually be comfortable around an adult for once. He looks right over when she looks in, smiling at her.

“Hey Willow,” He greets, “Did you talk to Luz?”

“Uh, yeah,” She hesitantly answers, unsure why she thought Hunter was going to pick up the hint that she wanted to talk to him privately. She gestures for him to come with her, Hunter looking over at Eda for permission.

“What did I tell you, kid? No asking me for permission to do basic things, go ahead,” Eda encourages him, Hunter smiling and getting up, coming over to where Willow is. She leads him down the hallway into the kitchen, which is thankfully empty, not even bothering to sit down before she tells him.

“Something is *really* wrong with Luz,” She nervously says, Hunter looking at her confused.

“What do you mean? Is she sick or hurt or something?” Hunter questions, “She looked fine at breakfast.”

“No, no, not like that. But like- I went up there- Ok, so, yesterday, Luz got really defensive when I suggested talking to an adult about the way she’s been feeling because it’s been stopping her from doing things like sleeping and eating and when I asked her to tell her mom or Eda she was all upset about it, right?”

“Mhm, I’m following,” Hunter assures her.

“But today she came to apologize to me because yesterday she told me that I didn’t know that things had changed as justification for not wanting to tell Eda what was going on, because things had changed and apparently their relationship isn’t the same or something,” Willow explains.

“I’m a little confused but keep going,” Hunter slowly nods.

“So, today she apologized for it which was nice but the moment I just mentioned that I was worried about her she got almost scared I think? Was backing up and telling me not to tell anyone and that I was dumping her off on Eda. She went from calm to that almost instantly, it was kind of worrying,” Willow finishes, explaining the story having made her see even more of why this was concerning. It sends a chill of anxiety up her spine, which she brushes off the best she can, telling herself to just see what Hunter says.

It takes a minute, but Hunter hesitantly answers her, “I-I don’t know, that doesn’t sound like Luz. Being scared?”

“I know, that’s why I’m worried,” Willow agrees, “I don’t know if I read it wrong and maybe it *wasn’t* fear but I think I’m pretty good at reading people.”

“You’re really good, yeah,” Hunter nods, glancing back, “Do you want me to go visit her?”

“No, she’ll know I told you,” Willow denies.

“I could lie and say that, that uh,” Hunter thinks about it for a second before caving, “Yeah, maybe I can’t lie.”

Willow laughs, “You’re not a great liar.”

“I swear I used to be a lot better,” Hunter tries to justify.

“Well frankly I like that you’re not,” Willow teasingly smiles at him, savoring how he blushes a bit. It *really* doesn’t take much with him.

“But anyway, what do you want to do about Luz?” He asks, Willow’s smile dropping.

“I mean, did Amity come back from the tower?” She asks.

“No, she’s been in there with her dad,” Hunter tells her, “I mean, you could go get her if you really wanted?”

“No, I don’t want to bother her if she’s talking to her dad. She’ll probably go see Luz when she’s done, anyway,” Willow sighs, “I guess just leaving her alone is the best answer, right?”

“Yeah, probably,” Hunter nods, Willow staring at him for a second before caving to what she knows will calm her nerves and pulling him into a hug. Hunter takes a minute to hug back, but once he does he pulls Willow in close, Willow savoring the calming feeling it brings her. Hunter hugs very tightly and closely, and he has a tendency she’s pretty sure is unconscious to toy with her hair if they stay too long. It’s cute, and although she doesn’t say anything she notices it *every* time. The feeling of it now is grounding for her, bringing her back down to the reality that Luz just wants some space and will be ok, and that Willow is doing everything she can.

Willow steps back after a couple of minutes, knowing that Hunter definitely won’t stop if she started it. She hasn’t quite figured out if it’s because he likes hugging her or if it’s because he wants to just follow her lead. Either way, she knows how it works, and when she steps back she smiles at him, “Thanks.”

“Mhm, yeah,” He awkwardly answers, Willow chuckling.

“You act like we did something crazy,” She comments, Hunter getting red again.

“Uh, no, I mean, it’s just uh, a hug,” Hunter flusteredly replies.

“Mhm yeah, it is,” She smiles, “But it’s with you, and I like hugs with you.”

Hunter’s ears twitch, replying, “Uh, yeah, I like them too.”

Willow lets the moment sit for a second before both of them look over to the hallway at someone yelling.

“Willow!” Gus calls, “Are you down here?”

“In the kitchen,” She yells back, Gus appearing in the doorway a second later, going from a mildly

solemn expression to smiling.

“Am I interrupting something?” He teasingly asks, Willow rolling her eyes.

“Gus,” She groans, Gus laughing.

“Kidding, I’m kidding, I just wanted to know if you wanted to come up into the closet of human stuff with me, it’s lonely in there,” He tells her, looking at Hunter, “You too if you want. I’ve been working on figuring out what that chomping monster does.”

Willow nods, “Sure, I’ll come with you, I’m not doing anything.”

“Maybe I’ll be up later,” Hunter tells them, “I’ll hang out down here for now.”

“Mhm, ok! Come up whenever,” Gus tells him, grabbing Willow’s hand and pulling her with him, “Come on, I want to show you what Hunter and I found yesterday.”

“Ok, ok, bye Hunter!” Willow waves, running with Gus down the hall and up the stairs, into his little closet with his human things. He sits down, Willow sitting next to him as he pulls out a strange, black thing with a silver metal piece sticking out of the top part.

“You’ll never believe what this does,” Gus starts, pushing the top and bottom together. A small piece of folded metal comes out, Gus holding it up and looking at her excitedly.

“It spits out smaller metal pieces?” She asks, Gus nodding.

“Yeah, and I think I know what humans use it for,” He says, Willow knowing she’s in for a *wild* explanation of this silly little machine, but ready to hear it anyway.

“I’m ready, tell me,” She enthusiastically replies, seeing how much Gus lights up as he starts to explain.

“So I think that sometimes…”

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Hunter goes back into the living room after he hears Willow and Gus go upstairs, both Raine and Eda looking at him eagerly. Although the moment he walks in, Eda’s expression shifts to dramatic shock.

“Kid, you’re all red, what were you *lovebirds* doing in my kitchen?” She teases, Hunter flushing with embarrassment, covering his face with his hands.

“Eda!” He complains, Eda just laughing.

“I’m kidding, kid, I’m kidding, come here,” She pats the spot on the couch next to her where he was before, Hunter dropping his hands and sitting back down. He looks at Eda annoyed, Eda’s tone of voice getting more serious, “Hey, if it really bothers you I can stop. You just have to ask.”

“No, no, it’s ok,” He assures her, “Just- Not in front of anyone else.”

“Mhm, noted,” She nods, ruffling his hair, “Now, really, what did you two talk about? Something

about talking to Luz?"

"Oh, uh, I can tell you but you can't do anything, you're not supposed to know," He tells both her and Raine, who is looking at Hunter just as eager for an answer.

"My lips are sealed, kid," Eda replies, Hunter looking at her confused, trying to figure out *what* that means. Raine seems to pick up on it, thankfully, because they explain it.

"She means she won't tell anyone," Raine tells him, Hunter nodding.

"Ohh, ok, ok yeah, good," He nods, "Sorry, uh, that didn't make sense."

"Hey, it's no problem kid, just ask, I'll explain it," Eda assures him, "Titan knows Raine isn't the fastest on the uptake."

"Hey!" Raine argues, laughing, "I'm a perfectly *normal* speed, just because you're so quick and witty doesn't mean I'm stupid."

"I never said you were," She counters before waving her hand in their direction. "But that's irrelevant, I need to know what Willow said."

"Ok, ok, I'm listening," Raine leans back in the armchair, Hunter looking between the two of them before starting to explain, more directed at Eda considering she was a conversation topic.

"She just- She talked to me about how yesterday Willow suggested to Luz talking to you or her mom about what had been going on because she'd been feeling really bad recently and when she did Luz got really upset and then today when she apologized for uh, I didn't understand that part, I don't know, but they talked again today and when Willow even mentioned being worried about Luz she immediately got upset and Willow said also kind of scared? Telling her that she was dumping her off on you when she hadn't even mentioned anything about you I don't think," He explains, "I don't know, Willow was worried that Luz seemed scared of her telling someone about Luz struggling, I don't know why. It sounded worrying, though."

"Our Luz? Scared?" Eda questions, her and Raine exchanging a mutual look of worry before Eda looks back at Hunter, "That's all she told you about?"

Hunter nods, "Yeah, and the story she told me was kind of rushed, so I hope that what I got from it was right."

"It sounds right, like a linear story, at least, but really weird," Eda muses, "Maybe I'll grab Camila and talk about it at some point, maybe she'll know."

"She can't tell anyone I told you, either," Hunter reminds her, making sure to cover all his bases.

"Mhm, I'll make sure she knows," Eda assures him, all of them looking over when they hear someone talking in the hallway.

"I know Ghost, I know, come on, let's tell them," Amity excitedly whispers to her palisman, Hunter's interest immediately peaking. He looks over at Eda and Raine, Eda seemingly knowing what he's about to say.

"Kid if you ask me if you can leave I'm going to smother you in another hug until you stop," She playfully threatens him, Hunter laughing and getting up.

"Ok, ok, I won't ask. I *am* going upstairs to see what she was talking about," Hunter declares,

putting his hands on the table so Flapjack, who was cuddled up with Owlbert, can hop over and up into his hands.

“Thank you for your help kid, we appreciate the spying,” Eda tells him.

“It’s *not* spying,” Hunter corrects her, “I’m just, I don’t know, telling you things.”

“So picky,” Eda laughs, “Thank you for whatever you did, call it what you want.”

“I’ll be waiting for more, if you find it out,” Raine chimes in, Eda looking over at them.

“You have never changed, Rainestorm, gossip gossip gossip,” She jokes, looking back at Hunter, “But don’t get it wrong, I’ll be waiting too.”

“I’ll be sure to keep you updated,” He smiles, waving before walking off upstairs, a really warm feeling settling in his chest. He *loves* hanging out around Eda and Raine, and he really likes how they treat him. It’s nice, and the closest thing he ever got to it was the rare positive moments he had with Darius, but this is way better than that. He feels like they really care about him, and he likes that they joke around the way they do but aren’t upset when he doesn’t get it, something Darius sometimes had a problem with. It sparks a small part of him thinking about after all of this is over, if they’ll let him stay here. He’d like that, he thinks, but he doesn’t get his hopes up.

When he comes upstairs he hears Amity almost frantically yet lightly explaining from where she’s standing in the closet doorway, “Titan, I thought that was the peak of it but then someone knocked on the door asking for, guess who, you’ll never guess.”

“Darius, wasn’t it?” Willow answers.

“Yes! Darius!” Amity exclaims, “And my dad, he tried to brush it off that they were just friends but Hettie asked if Darius was *asleep* in the room which means they sleep in the *same room,* in the *same bed* - I can’t believe this, I knew I was right.”

Hunter takes a step closer, a floorboard creaking and Amity jumping. Hunter gets *really* worried she’s gonna get mad at him for eavesdropping, but she just sighs and smiles.

“Titan, Hunter, you scared me, you can come in if you want to hear, come on,” Amity steps into the closet more, out of the way so Hunter can walk inside, sitting down, with Flapjack in his hands in his lap, across from Willow and next to Gus, who is sitting in front of the box he’s been sifting through across from the closet door. Amity walks in, too, sitting down to complete the circle, continuing her rant, “Ok, Hunter, to catch you up my dad and Darius are actually, really together. I went to talk to him and he has *one* bed in there and Hettie came knocking asking about Darius being asleep in his room and- Titan, I *just* remembered, do you know what I saw peeking out of his closet? Purple fabric. Do you *know* who wears that?”

Hunter looks over at Willow confused since a lot of people he knows wear that. Willow seems to understand instantly, though, responding to Amity, “Darius?”

“Darius! I can’t believe this, this is *insane* , of *course* my dad is with the same guy he’s been complaining about my whole life, of course that’s what I miss being in the Human Realm for two months,” She shakes her head, “I have no idea how to feel.”

Willow laughs, “You’re so stressed about this, it’ll be ok, you’ll just, you know, have two dads.”

“Willow, I know it’s so normal for you but this is *not* normal for me,” Amity tells her, “I’m used to, I don’t know, my horrible mom! Now I’m going to have *Darius* ? It’s such a jarring change,

those two are not equivalent."

"Ok, well, that's fair," Willow concedes, "I think it'll be good, though, your dad will probably be happier."

"Oh definitely, he already is, today was the happiest I've seen him in probably at least a few years, if ever," Amity agrees, "My dad, he's so weird, such an awkward guy. He's trying, I guess, but he just has no idea how to do anything *but* work."

"Consequence of your mom, I'm guessing?" Willow asks, Amity nodding.

"Mhm, yeah, we talked about that today. He told me about how she used to make him work and everything, it was actually really sad," Amity says, leaning back on her hands, "And it was great, the conversation we had was great, it's great to finally feel close to my dad again, but I am *not* over that he's dating Darius. That was not on any kind of list of things I was expecting when I came back."

"Love is blooming in the Owl House, apparently," Gus chimes in, "Have you seen Eda and Raine recently?"

"That was *bound* to happen putting them in close quarters," Amity comments, "From what Luz has told me, at least Eda has always been like, in love with Raine, even after they broke up."

"I don't think they're together, though," Hunter says.

"Really? You don't think so?" Amity asks, Hunter shaking his head.

"No, Luz said when she talked to Eda that Eda said they're not together yet but they're on the way to be," Hunter explains, shrugging, "I don't know, they seem a lot like they are."

Gus playfully jests, " *You* would know with all the time you spend around them."

Hunter flushes red with embarrassment, really not wanting anyone to acknowledge how attached he's grown to Eda and Raine. Is it obvious with how much he's sitting and talking to one of them or how he's ended up in their room the last two nights? Yes. Has it sunk in that everyone else sees that too? Absolutely not. He puts his hand over his face, the rest of them laughing.

"It's not a *bad* thing," Gus tells him, "And you can tell us about how close they are to getting together."

"Gus," Hunter groans into his hands, Gus laughing and nudging him.

"Come on, Hunter, you're our inside source!" He jokes, the room stilling for a moment before he continues, just as bright, "And you deserve it, too, Eda and Raine are pretty cool."

Hunter smiles, dropping his hands into his lap and looking back at Gus, sighing before nodding, "Yeah, they are pretty cool."

Hunter sees how everyone else is also happily smiling at him, although the comfortable silence only lasts a second before someone knocks on the open door, everyone looking over to see Camila poking her head in the room.

"I thought I heard talking coming from here, why are you all in a closet?" She questions.

"It's a closet of human stuff Eda has," Gus explains to her, pointing back at the big wooden thing

Gus has been calling ‘cornhole’. “Like this, cornhole, and its bags of beans!”

Camila laughs, “Bean bags, you mean? You guys don’t have cornhole here?”

Everyone shakes their heads, Gus telling her, “Nope, no idea what it is.”

“It’s a game,” She tells them, “The wooden board has a hole. There are two teams with the two colored bean bags and you try to toss the bean bag into the hole from far away. You get uh, 3 points, I think? If you get it in, and one if you get it on top of the board. It’s fun, you guys should try to play it sometime.”

“Woah,” Gus marvels, “That’s so awesome, now what does this do?” Gus picks up the chompy metal thing that he and Hunter were looking at yesterday. Camila laughs.

“That’s a stapler, does it have staples in it?” She asks, Gus just handing it to her. She opens it up the same way Hunter did, smiling, “Yeah, ok, it does. Now here, look,” She grabs a couple of pieces of paper from some sack of boxes to her left, crouching down and putting the paper between the top and the bottom of the stapler, where Hunter put his finger. She squeezes it together and takes the paper out, showing how the little metal it spits out went through the two pieces. Gus takes the paper from her and turns it over, everyone leaning over to see how the metal folded on the back of the second piece. “See, it staples them together.”

“That is *so* cool,” Gus says, taking back to stapler when Camila offers it and beginning to staple the paper some more.

“Good thing I didn’t do that with my finger in it yesterday,” Hunter muses as he watched Gus repeatedly use the stapler.

“Hunter,” Camila stresses, her voice mildly strained but still lighthearted, “If you don’t know what something does, *please* don’t put your finger in it.”

Flapjack hops up and down in his hands, tweeting at him, *“Human mom right, Hunter stupid.”*

“Flapjack, I’m going to put you in one of these boxes and leave you there,” Hunter threatens, everyone around him looking at him in slight shock.

“Hunter hurt Hunter, Flapjack no help,” Flapjack hops to put his back to Hunter. Hunter just rolls his eyes and laughs.

Camila, who admittedly looks a bit confused, chuckles, “I’ll leave you to all that, you can come and ask if you want me to explain anything, too,” She tells him, Gus nodding and looking up at her.

“Thank you!” He replies, Camila just smiling before walking back out of the closet, back to wherever she was going before. Gus looks back at the board for cornhole behind him, looking around before asking everyone, “Do you guys want to try and play?”

Hunter looks at Amity and Willow, seeing Amity shrugging and Willow nodding, “Yeah, sure Gus! Why not?”

Gus excitedly smiles back, getting up and collecting up the bean bags as he happily replies.

“Well, someone go get Luz and let’s set it up!”

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“I don’t know,” Eda sighs, rubbing the spot where her right arm joins to the prosthetic to try to alleviate the throbbing it feels like the stump of her arm is doing as she talks, “I can’t go to Luz, then she’ll know someone told me and that’s the exact thing she *doesn’t* want. But I can’t just leave her to struggle, that’s not good for her.”

“Let her come to you, Eda, that’s all you can do,” Raine shrugs, “Whatever is going on in her head when it clears up she’ll talk to you. That’s my best recommendation.”

“Mmm, I don’t like it,” She frustratingly hums, sucking air in her teeth when she presses on a particularly sensitive spot on her arm, sending pain shooting both up it and somehow into the hand she doesn’t have anymore. Raine looks at her concerned, leaning forward.

“Are you ok? You’ve been rubbing at it all morning,” Raine comments, pointing at her abomination hand.

“Yeah, I’m fine, it’s just, sore, I guess,” Eda shrugs, although that’s a lie and she can tell Raine knows it.

“Eda,” They scold, “Don’t lie to me, does it hurt?.”

Eda sighs, leaning back on the couch and dropping both of her arms into her lap, “Yeah, it hurts today. It’s just been throbbing all morning, holding that plate like that was stupid.”

“You’ve also been cooking breakfast and dinner every day, plus everything else you’ve been doing for everyone. Just take it easy for today, don’t push yourself.

“Mmm, I have stuff to do today, taking it easy can be for tomorrow,” Eda dismisses them, Raine sighing.

“Eda, come on, you’re going to hurt yourself,” They stress, “Do it tomorrow.”

“No, absolutely not, it’s getting done today,” She firmly states, “I’ll do it one-handed, I don’t care. Those kids deserve to sleep in beds.”

They sigh again, smiling this time, “I’m not changing your mind, am I?”

“Nope, and just because you tried to, maybe I’ll break into something else while I’m there, just for fun,” She teases, Raine laughing.

“You’ve never changed, Eda,” They muse, “Forever my Calamity.”

Eda’s brain completely sputters out, face immediately flushing red as she stares almost agape at the comment they made, unsure if they meant it in the way *she* took it or not. They do proudly smile, though, giving her somewhat of an indication of what they meant, but something in her still doubts it. Eda, completely unable to form a single thought at the moment, is thankful that they fill the silence.

“But whatever you do, just be safe, ok? Ask for help if you need it,” Raine tells her, Eda nodding.

“Mhm, yep, will do,” She affirms, still trying to get a hold of her own head to actually process anything. Raine just laughs again, looking over towards the entryway to the living room. Eda

follows their gaze, seeing Camila peeking into the room.

“Oh, sorry,” She very awkwardly says. Eda is quick to stop her.

“Oh, no, no, you’re ok, Raine was actually just about to go talk to Mason about making beds,” Eda stares over at Raine, who looks confused.

“I was?” They ask, Eda widening her eyes to try to get them to get the hint. It takes a second, but they do, “Yeah, yeah, I was just about to uh, go do that.”

Raine gets up, walking out and waving to Camila as they do. Camila just looks at Eda and laughs, walking over to sit down on the loveseat.

“You’re making beds?” Camila asks, “For what?”

“For all of you, I’m going out today to get mattresses for them, actually. I was talking to Hunter the other day and he said the kids haven’t slept in real beds in two months, I figured it was about time they got beds here,” Eda shrugs, “And you too, of course.”

“Oh, you don’t have to make one for me, but I’m sure the kids would love it,” She replies, Eda shaking her head.

“Nope, I had this debate with Hunter the other day, *everyone* is getting a bed. If I can find it somewhere in my heart to give Terra Snapdragon a bed, I can get you one.”

Camila looks at her confused, “Who is that?”

“Oh, you haven’t met the coven heads, have you?” She realizes, “A horrible horrible woman, you’re gonna meet her when we all sit down and talk sometime this week and see what I mean.”

“I trust you,” Camila chuckles, Eda taking advantage of the silence to bring up the topic she wanted to talk about with her.

“Actually, I wanted to ask you about something, if you’re not busy,” Eda requests, Camila smiling.

She nods, “Of course, I’m not doing anything.”

“So, you can’t tell Luz I told you this, but through the teenager snake vine I heard that Willow and Luz talked after breakfast, and Luz got somehow scared by the idea of Willow telling an adult about how Luz had been feeling? Hunter told me the story and even he was a little uncertain about the details, but Luz was completely against telling me or you anything about how she’s been,” Eda explains, “Me, I get it, but I don’t understand why we’re both not an option and I just wanted to know your opinion on what to do because she’s, you know, your daughter.”

Camila sits there for a long minute, and when she speaks again she’s very hesitant, “I mean, it’s only something Luz and I talked about recently when she came back to the Human Realm, but I have an idea of why she’s being like that about it.”

Eda nods, waiting quietly for Camila to explain it to her. It takes a moment, but she does explain.

“So, I know we talked about this earlier, you know that my husband Manny died, right?” Camila asks, Eda nodding much more solemn this time. “He had been sick since Luz was young, and we moved when Luz was about 7 because he had been getting a lot worse and needed to be closer to a better treatment center. It was, well, hard on Luz, very hard, and she was struggling in school and couldn’t maintain having friends very well so her school recommended she see a therapist to help

her with, you know, everything going on. He was alright, she liked him when she was a kid. I didn't hear anything about him until after Manny died. Luz mentioned to me that she wanted to see someone else but at the time I really didn't have the money to do that so she just had to keep seeing him. Apparently, she told me very recently that he was really mean to her about her reaction to everything that was happening, saying that she should have expected when he died and she shouldn't be so upset about it, really bad things. I- I never knew, Luz never told me, and if she did I would have found someone else, but she's, uh, had a tendency to mistrust me because of that. She told me when we were home that she's worried I'm going to do that again. I never would, I never wanted to in the first place, but I think that sometimes Luz gets in her own head and worries about that happening again. I don't know, that's just what I think might be contributing to it, and even though you have never done that to her it's bleeding over into you, too, as an adult in her life"

Eda has to spend a long moment processing the story, only able to provide a weak, "That's- That's hard, I'm sorry."

"It's alright, really, I know I can't go back and change the past. All I can do now is work with the knowledge of what happened and fix it," Camila shrugs, "And I think that this experience has something to do with Luz not wanting to talk to anyone but her friends about things she's struggling with."

"Mhm, yeah, it makes sense," Eda nods, "So there's nothing you can really do?"

"No, not really, I trust that if she really needs help she'll seek someone out or ask for help in the way she needs to, she knows that the support is there to take when she's ready," Camila reasons.

"You trust her to do that?" Eda questions, doubling back when she hears how bad that sounded, "Not like, no, I trust Luz, but, I don't know, you aren't worried?"

"Oh, of course I am," Camila replies, "But one of my biggest mottos when it comes to parenting is that feeling trusted is one of the most powerful things you can do for a kid. If Luz feels like we trust her to know her own body and mind, then she'll feel like support is ready and there when she needs it. Especially Luz, she's always liked to be independent. No one likes to be micromanaged like that, I know I never did."

"Mmm, yeah, that makes a lot of sense. My mom was the biggest micromanager out there. Asked me all the time about every detail about me to make sure I wasn't dying or something and I hated it," Eda remarks, "I never saw it like that, though, but I guess they are equivalent. She knows herself, she's been in that body her whole life."

"Mhm, exactly," Camila smiles, chuckling, "It's funny how Luz has two moms in two completely different realms with the same ideas."

Eda can't stop herself from *beaming* about how Camila referred to her as Luz's mom, sheepishly shrugging and answering, "I mean, I guess, you're a little better at it than me, though."

"I'm not sure about that, and besides, it's not a competition," Camila assures her, "I've made my own fair share of mistakes, it comes with the job."

Eda laughs, calmed by how nonchalant Camila is talking about all of this. It sets her at ease, too, because if Camila, someone who has been raising Luz for 15 years, thinks that this is ok then it's ok. She replies after a moment, "That's actually very comforting, thank you."

"Of course," Camila happily replies, pausing a second before asking, much less serious this time, "Now can I ask you a completely unrelated and maybe insensitive question?"

“Yeah, go for it, I’m an open book,” Eda encourages.

“What is your hand made out of?” Camila asks, pointing to Eda’s abomination hand, “I’m sorry, it’s been bugging me for days and this definitely isn’t the moment to ask but I really want to know.”

“Oh, it’s totally fine, and abomination goo,” Eda answers, Camila nodding and humming.

“Mhm, ok, that’s what I thought. It’s the stuff Amity uses, right?”

“Yep, her dad made this for me, actually. I used to have a real second hand, but uh, yeah, not anymore, so he made me one,” Eda explains, twisting her arm around to look at it, “He makes stuff like this, abomination machines, all the time, and I guess he dabbles in prosthetics too.”

“It’s very impressive how he can just make you a hand. Well, I guess it’s magic, right? So it makes sense,” Camila reasons with herself, “Sorry, I’m still getting a handle on how things work here.”

“It’s totally fine, you can always ask me questions, I’ve taught a human the ropes before,” She points upstairs, “And she holds her own pretty well.”

Camila laughs but doesn’t get to reply, since Raine sticks their head back in the room.

“Eda,” They call her attention over, “Mason said if you get the mattresses he’ll make them. Darius also, surprisingly, offered to stitch up some of those old blankets you have stuffed away if they need it. But he said he’ll only do it after you have the debrief meeting he wants.”

“He’s so picky,” She huffs, “But I’ll go out and get them today, can you go get my mom and dad’s palismen to help me carry it back? And Lily’s too, please.”

“Titan, am I doing *all* your chores?” They laugh, “Is your sister even *alive* ? I haven’t seen her in days.”

“She’s probably making those stupid little models that she’s been working on for the last two months, she’s alive in there, I’ve checked,” Eda replies, shrugging, “It’s Lily, do you expect her to be normal and have a normal level of urgency right now?”

“Alright, fair, I’ll go get them,” They nod, heading back into the tower. Eda sighs, standing up and stretching a bit to prepare for her journey into the Collector’s spell.

“Where are you going to get mattresses?” Camila asks.

“Just into town, I’m going to, well, steal them, but it’s for the greater good,” Eda reasons, Camila chuckling.

“Whatever works, I’m certainly not going to judge,” Camila shrugs, “I beat and tied up the guy that captured Vee once, I’m not above crime.”

Eda laughs, completely unable to picture such a nice woman like Camila beating *anyone* up, “I see where Luz got it.”

Camila laughs too, Eda stepping out into the middle of the room and closing her eyes, searching through her brain to find wherever the Owl Beast has been hanging out, probably sleeping. It doesn’t fight her on it, just letting her morph back into her harpy form, although it is *not* happy about the ache in her arm that’s been present all morning.

“Calm down,” She whispers to herself, “There’s nothing I can do about it.”

She looks up to see Camila staring at her in shock, shaking her head when Eda makes eye contact with her. “Sorry, that was just- just a little jarring, woah.”

Eda looks at her confused, “You’ve seen me like this, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, I have, I guess I just never put the pieces together,” She chuckles, “You can just go in and out?”

“Yep, as long as I can get the old Owl Beast to agree to it,” She replies, holding up her left hand so Owlbert can come and land on it.

“Owl Beast?” She questions, “Goodness, there's still a lot I don’t understand about being here.”

Eda laughs, “Just the name for my curse, he uh, kind of lives up inside my head. It’s a long story.”

She looks up when Hawksley and Sunny come flying into the room, Hawksley settling on her left shoulder and Sunny on her right. She sees Raine wave as they walk by and go upstairs to talk to Lilith. Camila, who is still sitting on the couch in mild shock, hesitantly asks again.

“I’m sorry, I have a lot of questions, but are those palismen?”

Eda nods, “Mhm, Sunny,” She nods to the right, “Is my dad’s and Hawksley,” She nods to the left, “Is my mom’s.”

“And they’ll just go with you?” She asks, “I thought palismen stayed with their uh, their owner.”

“They do normally, but I need help carrying back the stuff I’m getting, so I need them and with the trust of their owners, who are my parents so I’d hope that I’d have that, they come with me. I’m bringing my sister’s palisman, too, which should be here any second now.”

Almost completely on cue, Ravenald comes soaring into the room, landing right on top of Eda’s head. Camila laughs.

“I haven’t seen that one, that’s your sister’s?” She asks, Eda humming in affirmation.

“Mhm, that’s Ravenald,” She affirms, “You saw him on the staff, I think. He looks, well, completely different off of it.

Camila laughs, “He’s very cute. I’ve never seen a raven in any color other than black, it’s just funny to see.”

“Yeah, he compliments Lily well,” Eda jokes, “Well, I want to get out there with as much daylight left as I can, so I’m going to get going.”

“Alright, be safe, and thank you for doing this. It’s very nice of you,” Camila tells her, Eda smiling.

“Mhm, of course, I’ll be back,” She answers, looking up when Raine walks in to stand in the doorway.

“Don’t get yourself in too much trouble,” They warn her, teasingly smiling.

“I’ll be sure to cause some *extra* chaos just for you, Rainestorm,” She jokes back, Raine just laughing. Eda waves before turning around, Hooty swinging the door open.

“Hoot hoot hoot! You are looking good, sister!” He compliments her, Eda rolling her eyes, smiling.

“Thanks, Hooty, now can you let me out?” She requests.

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” He swings the door closed, opening up his mouth to make the entryway big enough for Eda to crouch through, shutting it on the other side. “Have a fun trip Eda!” Hooty calls to her, Eda looking at him expectantly for him to spit out the tarp she needs. It takes him a second, but he remembers, “Oh, yeah! Here!” He stretches forward, unhinging his jaw and spitting out the bundled-up tarp they’ve been carrying stuff back from town on. “Special delivery!”

“Thanks, Hooty,” Eda replies, all 4 of the palismen going over to grab each corner. Eda starts flying too, gesturing for them to follow her. Owlbert flies away from the tarp though, disgruntledly hooting at Eda.

“Tarp gross,” He tells her, Eda just waving her hand at him dismissively.

“Just grab it, Owlbert, it’ll dry,” She dismisses.

Owlbert exasperatedly mumbles his answer. *“Eda owe Owlbert.”*

Eda just rolls her eyes at the bird, taking a deep breath before telling all of them.

“Come on, guys, let’s steal some mattresses.”

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